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The visual representation of female masculinity in Marvel and DC comic books

Yannick McCullum

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by

Yannick McCullum

Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand the visual representation of female masculinity in Marvel and DC comic books, and further contribute to the fields of linguistics and gender studies. The subject matter discussed issues around gender identity, masculinity, and visual representation. Currently, there is a lack of literature available on the subject matter of female masculinity in comic books, therefore creating a gap in knowledge about how women are being represented in comic books. The goal of this thesis was to contribute to this knowledge, and in doing so, further adding more knowledge about the subject matter for future researchers in the field. The theoretical framework included a diverse approach of social theories and perspectives, namely: Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Intertextuality, Dialogicality, and Queer Theory. The goals of this thesis were to understand the various modes used in the representation of female masculinity that have evolved over time, and how these modes contribute to developing characters who challenge the traditional gender norms and rules. The data that was used for this thesis was collected from comic books in which female characters are in leading roles, namely Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers) and Wonder Woman. The data was collected from the various eras in which the comic books were published.

Keywords

Visual Language, Female Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Multimodality, Intertextuality, Dialogicality, Queer Theory, Comic Books.

Declaration

I, **Yannick McCullum**, declare that **The visual representation of female masculinity in Marvel and DC comic books** is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references

Yannick McCullum

December 2020

Signed:



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Date: 11 December 2020

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During the writing of this thesis, the comic book industry lost one of its pioneers, Mr Stan Lee from Marvel Comics. Mr Lee was a cultural icon and fundamental figure within the comic book industry.

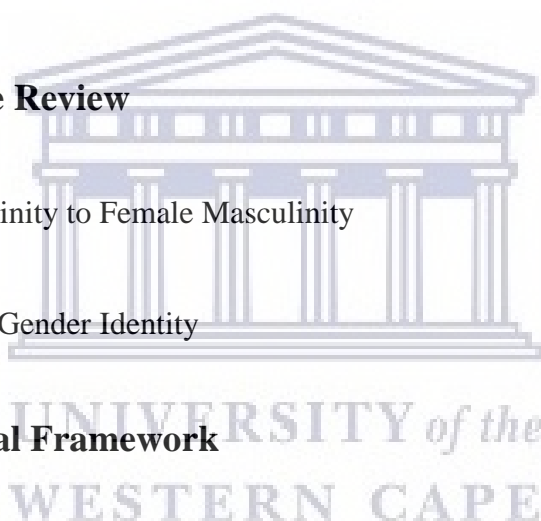
“Excelsior” - Stan Lee (1922-2018)

Yannick McCullum

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Comic books have provided generations of youths and adults with entertainment through their fantasy-filled storylines and colourful visual displays of storytelling. The comic book industry can be viewed as being an instrument that contributes to pop culture in the sense that comic books and their characters have expanded into the film and video game industry. This thesis seeks to understand and examine the representation of female masculinity and women in Marvel and DC comic book universes¹, by discussing relevant literature on Visual Language, Masculinity, Multimodality and Gender Identity. The theoretical framework includes Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Intertextuality, Dialogicality, Intersectionality and Queer Theory.

1.2. Background of Study

Marvel and DC comic books have spanned across decades with each decade's norms and ideals being reflected in the comic books, which allowed writers to create some storylines the audience could relate to and to identify with the hero's struggle. The visual construction of masculinity and gender identity within Marvel and DC comic books is both unrealistic and male dominated. Female characters are often represented as an extension of their male counterpart's storyline, being cast in secondary character roles. Examples include Batgirl and Supergirl who never truly have their own sense of identity as they are linked to their male counterparts. Another type is the "damsel in distress" character who always needs the hero to save her from whatever fate has befallen her.

Women have been represented in various roles other than a love interest or a damsel in distress compared to the male hero, and these roles include superhero, sidekick, villain, and advisor. A pivotal moment for women in the comic universe came in the form of *All-Star Comic #8* in

¹ In this context, the universe refers to the notion of crossovers in comic books. Alberich *et al.* (2008:3) describes this notion as "a hero with its own title series appears in an issue of another hero's story." Characters from the Marvel universe all live within the same fictional universe and this may cause some characters to cross paths with one another. The same notion can be applied to DC comic books in which some heroes, villains and other characters might feature outside their own comic book storyline and appear in another storyline, for example *Batman vs. Superman* (DC) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (Marvel Comics).

1941, with the first appearance of Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman embodies both princess and warrior. She leaves her home world to fight alongside men in World War II (Dunne, 2006). This made her an icon for young men and women to contribute to the war efforts. Wonder Woman embodies masculine qualities that are equal to her male counterparts, yet she is represented and portrayed in a sexual manner, with large breasts, slim waistline and skin-tight body armour.

With the progression of time, there has been a sharp increase in the representation of women and diversity in comic books. However, this progression is not welcomed by some readers. As recently seen in the *Invincible Iron Man Vol. 3 #3*, a new character is introduced, Riri Williams, a young black woman who assumes the role of Iron Man. However, this newfound inclusion of women, people of colour, and LGBTIQ+ characters has been met with some resistance from a section of the comic book community. The movement #Comicsgate² ensued on social media, more specifically Twitter. There are several articles addressing the movement #Comicsgate: Eric Francisco wrote an article for Inverse titled “*Comicsgate is Gamergates next horrible evolution*”, and Rachel Krishna’s article from BuzzFeed news, “*There’s An Online Harassment Campaign Underway Against People Advocating For Diversity in Comics*”.

Twitter users associated with this movement harassed various comic book creators who were women, people of colour, and those who are viewed as being politically left in the comic book community (Francisco, 2018). In relation to this thesis, #Comicsgate provides an interesting perspective into the comic book community in terms of how some seek to maintain the hegemonic status of society in this medium. Progression in comic books that feature female-centred protagonists are met with backlash and boycotts because these characters challenge the status quo of traditional gender roles and identity.

An example of this would be the comic book *Mockingbird* which was boycotted because of its feminist female protagonist, and the writer was harassed through online platforms. These are the types of actions and resistance that unfold in the comic book community when comic books go against the status quo by representing strong female characters and rework characters to fit the socio-political climate. The characters discussed in this thesis are viewed as being feminist and have each broken down gender norms in their respective manners. Wonder Woman and

²#Comicsgate refers to an online campaign and cultural dispute against individuals seeking to diversify the comic book industry, by targeting creators who are calling for more representation of women, people of colour and queer identities (Krishna, 2018).

Captain Marvel have been subjected to forms of harassment, as they are viewed as being progressive women in their respective comic book series and universes.

One needs to question whether the movement #Comicsgate and others like it are the reason women in comic books are represented in a specific manner. Comic books have been known to strive for their inclusion and their resistance, as Francisco (2018) points out with the image of Captain America punching Hitler. This is an example of how comic books have always strived for inclusivity in terms of challenging ideologies that view an individual as being different or unequal. Compared to the ideologies of the audience from the #Comicsgate movement, it paints two different ideologies when it comes to the representation and inclusion of diversity in comic books.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Masculinity in comic books is represented by male characters with bulging muscles that match their superhero capabilities, as well as being almost invincible. The problem remains that masculinity is only represented and performed through male characters. Brown (1999:25) states that “Comic Book masculinity characterizes for young readers a model of gender behaviour that traditionally struggles to incorporate both sides of the masquerade yet has recently slipped into the domain of the almost exclusively hypermasculine”. In doing this, comic books reinforce gender norms and rules that are reflected in society.

Comic books are often described as being expressions and reflections of society. However, female characters in hegemonic society who subscribe to the idea of masculinity are ridiculed and labelled as being *butch* or *tomboys* and are subjective to their male counterparts. Brown (1999:26) states that “Classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man”. This notion of what it means to be a man is expressed by what Connell (1995) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call hegemonic masculinity, the core belief and understanding that men need to assert their masculinity and subscribe to the attitudes of a hegemonic man to be regarded as a real man.

Women in comic books are represented as sexual objects, a notion that several scholars have pointed out. Taylor Turberville discusses this in *The Female Justice League: The Misrepresentation of Women in Comic Books* (2016), stating, “In many comics, women are shown being sexually objectified with unrealistic feminine features, uncomfortable or

impossible poses and unreasonably inefficient uniforms” (Turberville, 2016:73). This notion that Turberville (2016) presented provides insight into the unrealistic standard of how gender is represented in comic books. This manner of representation becomes problematic when editorial and artistic teams seek to break away from what has become the norm of how gender and gendered associated traits are represented in comic books.

Turberville (2016) discusses that, while the readership of comic books is currently changing with more girls and women reading comic books, the industry and community remains largely male. Over the years, comic books have become encapsulated within a standard of how gender norms and roles should be presented. Brown’s (1999) notion is relevant in addressing the current climate of comic books, as change – whether big or small in terms of how characters are presented – affect the audience’s perspective of that character and their willingness to engage with that character. This can be seen in several examples such as Riri Williams and Mockingbird.

The notions discussed by Brown (1999) and Turberville (2016), in terms of how women and gender are represented in comic books, shed light on the current issues within the comic book industry and within the comic book community. While there is a willingness from certain editorial and artistic teams to change the manner of representation, the repercussions are that comic books are boycotted, and members of the editorial and artistic teams are harassed, as in the case with several comic book titles and characters. This thesis poses several questions and objectives that seek to understand the various aspects that contribute to the representation of women in comic books, and how representation has evolved over time. Furthermore, the literature review brings together and elaborates on notions and perspectives on masculinity, multimodality, gender identity, and the construction of comic books through visual language.

1.4. Research Questions

By observing and discussing the problems that are present in the comic book community, several questions and objectives need to be asked in order for this thesis to discuss and analyse the representation of women in comic books. This thesis seeks to answer the following questions through the Literature Review, and through the analysis of the various comic books under the Methodology:

- Has the representation of the female body in Marvel and DC comic books evolved over time in relation to the societal representation of women?
- How is female masculinity and gender identity represented within Marvel and DC comic books through multimodality?
- What is the relationship between the visual representation and the textual construction of the characters? In other words, how does the text shape the identity of the characters and their portrayal in the Marvel and DC comic books?

1.5. Research Objectives

Through the engagement of literature and analysing the data collected from the selected comic books, this section outlines the objectives of this thesis. In terms of understanding how the visual representation of women has changed over time, and how female masculinity is represented through the various modes that contribute to the visual representation of the characters, this thesis aims to

- Analyse the representation of female masculinity through various modes in Marvel and DC comic books;
- Link the visual representation of past female masculinity to the current representations featured in Marvel and DC comics; and
- Understand how Marvel and DC comic books are shaping their female characters today in challenging traditional gender norms and roles.

Currently, several scholars have contributed to the phenomena of language, masculinity and gender identity. These include Sally Johnson and Ulrike Meinhof's *Language and Masculinity* (1997), and Tommaso Milani's *Language and Masculinities: Performance, Intersection, Dislocation* (2014). The aim of this thesis is to contribute to these fields by looking at the various semiotic modes that are used in representing female masculinity, and more specifically, to understand the ideology and gender norms incorporated in Marvel and DC comic books.

The study of comic books could become a promising research subject in the field of linguistics, whether to understand the components of visual language and the structure of comic books in

order to make meaning, to analyse the relationship between text and image, or to see how the complexities of identity shape the characters and their narratives. Comic books allow researchers an opportunity to explore how society is represented through this medium.

1.6. Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction provides the background and states the problems, questions and objectives of this thesis. In *Chapter 2: Literature Review* the relevant literature is discussed. The literature includes a discussion on Hegemonic masculinity and Female masculinity, Visual Language, and a collective discussion on Multimodality & Gender Identity. The discussion around hegemonic masculinity to female masculinity provides insight into the notion of how masculinity is presented in comic books and society. The section on Visual Language elaborates on the construction of the comic books and how meaning is made. The section on Multimodality and gender identity discusses how various modes are employed to represent gender in comic books.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework elaborates on the concepts that were applied to the data collected for this thesis. It provides further insight into the notions and aspects related to the theories and their relevance in relation to the subject matter being discussed. The theoretical concepts that are presented in this chapter include: Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Intertextuality, Dialogicality, Queer Theory and Intersectionality. Multimodal Discourse Analysis was employed to represent the characters. Intertextuality argues that images have an intertextual value, and Dialogicality presents the various voices found in comic books. Queer Theory and Intersectionality focus on the aspects that contribute to the development of the characters, aspects such as class, gender and race.

Chapter 4: Methodology elaborates on the methodology and data collection process that this thesis followed. This chapter elaborates on the approach to collecting the data and the method in which the data was analysed. It includes a portion that addresses how each character's data was collected. This is followed by *Chapter 5: Female masculinity representation of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel*. This chapter focuses on analysing the multimodal data collected from Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel comic books, in terms of the semiotic modes that contribute to the visual representation of these characters and how these modes have changed over time.

Chapter 6: Intertextuality and Dialogicality discusses how intertextuality and dialogicality were applied to analyse the data collected. This is followed by *Chapter 7: Queer and Intersectional Analysis*. This chapter elaborates on the notions of Queer Theory in relation to the sexualization of the characters, Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, and further discusses the various intersectional aspects that contribute to the development and portrayal of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. The final chapter, *Chapter 8: Conclusion* presents the concluding remarks and limitations that this thesis encountered, bringing together the concluding remarks on how women are represented in comic books, and the various issues that limited this thesis that future research could avoid or approach differently.



Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

Throughout the years, many scholars have discussed the dynamic relationship between masculinity and gender identity within the broader domain of media. Each scholar examines it from a different perspective with the common goal of analysing and discussing masculinity and gender identity in the media. This thesis seeks to examine and contribute to the broader understanding of these fields of masculinity, gender and media, but more specifically, print media.

This chapter provides the background to the concepts associated with how female masculinity is represented in Marvel and DC comic books. The concepts discussed are hegemonic masculinity to female masculinity, as these two concepts each bring their own understanding into the domain of masculinity and how masculinity is represented in various societies. The second concept in this thesis is Visual Language, as comic books are made up of various elements that structure a narrative for the reader. Visual language provides a deeper approach to understanding the grammatical structure behind comic books.

The third topic to be discussed in the literature review is a combination of two concepts, namely Multimodality and Gender Identity. These two concepts are discussed together due to the nature of the research project. Together these two concepts provide an in-depth discussion about the various modes that the comic book artists employ in the representation of female masculinity and the role of gender identity in Marvel and DC comic books.

2.2. Hegemonic Masculinity to Female Masculinity

Masculinity has been studied within various fields such as women and gender studies, sociology, psychology, and linguistics. Each of these fields have taken a different approach to studying and analysing masculinity in its various forms. Masculinity is a complex field of study in that many societies differ in terms of what it means to be masculine differently. Some view it as a rite of passage in which culture and tradition play a role, others view it as being physically capable of providing for one's family, while others measure physical strength as a sign of being a man.

Judith Halberstam (1998:2) describes masculinity as that which “inevitably conjures up the notion of power and legitimacy and privilege, it often symbolically refers to power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth”. The goal of this thesis is to understand two varieties of masculinity and to expand the concept of female masculinity in terms of understanding its conception and representation within the media. However, before doing so, it is crucial to discuss the notion of hegemonic masculinity which is regarded as being the dominant notion of masculinity, and how much female masculinity differs from this form of masculinity.

The discussion of hegemonic masculinity to female masculinity provides an interesting perspective on how comic books, more specifically Marvel and DC, represent these two notions of masculinity in their comic books. Hegemonic masculinity was first introduced in the 1980s and since then has been discussed and debated in a number of academic disciplines. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have described it as having an impact on new perspectives regarding men, gender and social hierarchy. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:832) described hegemonic masculinity as “the pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectation or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue”. Regarded as a new form of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity was viewed as being the superior form of masculinity while other forms were regarded as being inferior.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) further describe the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity as a splinter group of men that might perform it, however, it was without a doubt normative. Hegemonic masculinity incorporates the most respected manner of being a man. It further mandates that all other men need to align themselves to this notion of masculinity, and it allowed the universal subjection of women to men. Comic books do not shy away from representing men through a hegemonic lens, in the sense that male characters are often portrayed as being the hero with a firm muscular build, a persona that transcends through the pages of the comic book and whose purpose is to save the damsel in distress and defeat the villain.

The reason why comic books represent masculinity in this manner can be linked back to how society values and views masculinity as a trait that is associated with a particular type of man, along with various other features that deliver this image of masculinity. Brown (1999) mentions this notion of the traditional representation of masculinity as an expression of our ideals and values regarding what it means to be a man. Our own ideals and values about masculinity

become a point of origin for how comic books represent masculinity and how masculinity is represented in the larger discourse of the media.

Hence, it is our own ideals and values about masculinity that are then reproduced in various forms of media so that the viewer can identify or position themselves within this model of masculinity to be accepted in society. Robert Heasley (2005) discusses the representation of hegemonic masculinity in society, stating that “hegemonic masculinity is represented culturally in the icons of religion, sports, historical figure, economics, political leaders and the entertainment industry” (Heasley, 2005:110). This includes the cultural domain of comic books that contributes to the representation of hegemonic masculinity to its readers.

Comic books, as previously mentioned, have an impact on the representation of hegemonic masculinity as it shapes an ideology of gender and identity. As Brown (1999) discussed, comic books contribute to the understanding of masculinity and gender identity for young readers. Comic books play a significant role in the construction and reinforcement of gender behaviour and norms by reproducing ideologies regarding masculinity, a trait associated with the male body and men. In doing so, comic books create the idea of the perfect man; examples would be Superman and Captain America. Both superheroes embody the hypermasculine persona, honesty, nobility and truth, a sense of duty, and ready to save the damsel in distress.

Men are often represented with defined muscular bodies, and while women are portrayed as being masculine, there is an element of hypersexualizing female characters, regardless of being masculine or not. Roblou (2012:78-79) describes the relationship between the body and masculinity in the broader context of fiction as “the body, as an external signifier, has then come to represent all the conventions traditionally linked to assumptions of male power and masculinity. And, as a heavily inscribed sign, the muscular body clearly marks an individual as a bearer of masculine strength and superiority, all the more so in fiction.”

While female superheroes are represented as being masculine, their masculinity is not represented as being equal to their male counterparts. Instead, they are often portrayed in a sexual manner with certain features of the female body being the focal point, for example, the breasts and buttocks. This representation can be linked back to the foundation of hegemonic masculinity, which Connell (1995:77-78) describes as that which “entails the subjugation of women and vilification of gay men”. In comic books, women are represented as being submissive and are often sexualized in their appearance regardless of their role in the comic book as the hero or villain / femme fatale (characters that are most often sexualized).

One reason why women are subjected in comic books can be found in the male-dominated audience as well as the male-dominated editorial teams. Turberville (2016) states that over the years, female comic book characters were often represented unrealistically from men's perspectives, resulting in women being portrayed as sex objects for a heteronormative male market. Despite the increase in female readership, comic books follow this heteronormative portrayal of women, in which their bodies are subjective to the ideal depiction of what a woman should look like from a male's perspective.

The subjectification of women is a trait that is enshrined in the notion of hegemonic masculinity in the sense that if a woman attempts to present herself as being masculine, either through her physical or personal style, she becomes the subject of vilification. While hegemonic masculinity requires all men to position themselves in line to this notion of masculinity or face being vilified by their peers, another concept of masculinity takes an interesting approach into the larger domain of masculinity and gender identity. The concept of female masculinity brings forward an interesting perspective of navigating through the domain of masculinity without men, as it navigates through the domain of masculinity from a woman's perspective.

Judith Halberstam discusses the notion of female masculinity in her book, *Female Masculinity* (1998). Halberstam's (1998) work on female masculinity can be viewed as the stepping stone towards navigating masculinity outside of the hegemonic masculine domain and the heteronorm. Halberstam (1998:29) describes female masculinity as "not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity". Halberstam (1998), cited in Shaikjee (2014:15), describes female masculinity as "masculinity can exist without maleness and should not be reduced to the male body". Therefore, one cannot regard female masculinity as being an extension or another version of its male counterpart, but an entity on its own.

Jean Bobby Nobel, who cites Halberstam's work in her book, *Sons of the Movement: Feminism, Female Masculinity and Female to Male (FTM) Transsexual Men* (2004), described female masculinity as being the "masculinity without men", going further to say, "we posit that sometimes masculinity has nothing to do with men, we are not arguing literally female masculinity is not related to male masculinity. Instead, the argument is that masculinity now has nothing to do with the male body as it has been conventionally defined" (Nobel, 2004: 24). Thus, female masculinity should be regarded as its own masculine form in that it establishes a new form of masculinity outside of the domain of the physical man.

Female masculinity provides an alluring outlook into how the domain of masculinity that has been traditionally associated with men and only men, operate. Halberstam (1998) describes it as a promising site of study due to it being vilified by heterosexist and feminist agenda alike. Female masculinity provides a dynamic approach to analyse masculinity outside of the hetero-norm as this is a concept that is discussed in lesbian and queer discourse. Taking female masculinity out of its queer environment by applying it to women who embody masculine traits but do not identify with the labels *queer* or *butch*, allows for a new dimension in the aspects and characteristics of female masculinity. By no means does this thesis wish to extract female masculinity outside of its queer environment, but rather wishes to expand the notion of female masculinity to include women who embody masculine traits either physically or personally, but do not identify with the terms *queer* or *butch*.

The notion of expanding female masculinity has been discussed further by Nobel (2004). Instead of viewing female masculinity as a single notion of masculinity assigned to a particular type of woman, Nobel (2004:24), citing Halberstam, points out that the latter's work regarding female masculinity "...is most potent when she suggests that instead of conceptualizing female masculinity and lesbianism as coterminous and thus a singular figure between masculinity and femininity, our analytical findings are richer when female masculinity itself is understood as multiple, contradictory and inherently plural". It is therefore crucial to understand that female masculinity should not be viewed as being exclusive to queer women.

On this point Nobel elaborates: "In the end, she wants to make masculinity safe for women and girls, even heterosexual women, so that with more gender freedom, perhaps even men will be able to re-create masculinity using her model of female masculinity" (2004:24). Female masculinity therefore should be viewed as being inclusive of all women regardless of their sexuality. However, women who present themselves with masculine attributes are still vilified and are placed in the queer box; this can be seen in various comic books where female heroes who take on what is viewed as more "male"-like attributes.

Women in comic books are represented in various styles and through a number of characters and roles³. This thesis focuses on Wonder Woman (DC) and Captain Marvel (Marvel Comics). Both Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel embody masculine features, physically and personally, that deviate from the traditional hetero-norm regarding gender roles and behaviour.

³These roles include Superhero, Villain, Sidekick/Reworked Character, Damsel in distress and the femme fatale assigned as characters in comic books.

In doing so, they are breaking with traditional gender norms, and represent strong and empowering role models to both men and women. It is this characteristic of empowerment that is an aspect of female masculinity outside of the physical body, along with breaking and challenging traditional gender norms.

This representation of female masculinity has led to wider discussion regarding the sexuality of these characters, more specifically Wonder Woman. In recent years, there has been speculation regarding Wonder Woman's sexuality with her either being a lesbian or bisexual. The online platform BuzzFeed wrote an article in February 2018 titled *Three Big Superhero Movies, One Queer Tragedy*, discussing queer representation in Marvel and DC amongst its female characters, and the article points specifically to the characters Okoye (Black Panther), Valkyrie (Thor: Ragnarok), and Wonder Woman.

A common thread amongst all three characters is that they embody masculine attributes either through personality or physical capabilities. The BuzzFeed article points out the larger issue that both Marvel and DC comic books are lacking queer representation for both men and women. However, the article does more damage than good in the sense that when women are represented with masculine traits, the conclusion is that they are queer and viewed as *butch*. This is one example of reproducing the notion that if a woman does not fit in with the ideological standards of what it means to be a woman, she must be considered as *butch* or *queer*.

One can argue that the characters mentioned in this article each embody aspects of female masculinity in a physical sense, while their personalities embody both masculine and feminine qualities, for example, Okoye from Black Panther is in a relationship with a man in the film, while Wonder Woman's sexuality is an open question. These characters are able to perform masculine action and masculinity, a notion that Halberstam (1998:122), cited in Jones (2018), regards as "though some of the context she outlines in her discussion of female masculinity do involve a performance of maleness such as drag kings, overall she argues that female masculinity is far more than imitation of manhood".

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are superhero personas, but behind these personas they are Diana Prince (Wonder Woman) and Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel). One can view these superhero identities as being a performance of masculinity, along with masculine attributes. The characters Diana and Carol perform and embody these masculine attributes when dealing with their foes. However, these characters are represented as masculine in appearance and

empowering their bodies are represented in the stereotypical hyper-sexualized manner that is applied to women in comic books. Representing women in this manner brings forth the question of whether female masculinity can be sexualized to distract the reader from the masculine role that female superheroes occupy, a role that is often given to a man.

The relationship between female masculinity and hegemonic masculinity can be viewed as two opposites on the spectrum of masculinity, as female masculinity sets out its own path of masculinity by shaping masculinity in a domain without men. In breaking/challenging traditional gender roles and norms, female masculinity can be viewed as the empowerment of women by claiming a form of masculinity as their own, whereas hegemonic masculinity is the most ideal form and traditional meaning of what it means to be a man and the subjectification of women.

Female masculinity provides an opportunity for women to reshape the idea of masculinity without men in a world that requires gender to be placed in a box with specific attributes, unlike hegemonic masculinity which requires men to align themselves to this notion of masculinity or be ridiculed. Female masculinity opens its domain to all women, queer or straight, and to either perform or embody aspects of masculinity without being ridiculed. It creates a space for women beyond the notion of physically embodying a masculine body, but embodying attributes that are often associated with men outside of the male body or environment.

Representation is a crucial point in the comic book community, as there is an impasse between those who call for more equal and accurate representation, and those who seek to keep comic books in the status quo. However, both of these points can be traced back to the initial conception of comic books. The foundation of any comic book is its visual component that allows the reader to follow every detail through its gripping and colourful displays, and without this visual component, comic books would not exist. Through this visual component, readers can make meaning from the images that are displayed as there is a structure that comic books follow.

2.3. Visual Language

This portion of the thesis cites the work of Neil Cohn and other scholars to discuss the notion of visual language and its properties. Cohn (2005, 2013, 2018) writes extensively on the concept of visual language and its various uses in society, and more specifically, its use in

comic books. Before discussing visual language, it is crucial to state that this thesis does acknowledge the body of work by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006). This body of work of Kress and Van Leeuwen is further discussed in the following section, *Multimodality and Gender Identity*, as one of the components of visual language; modality relates to the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) point out that their work in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* focuses on the understanding of the visual grammar of images, as images are composed of different modes that contribute to the overall meaning of an image. Even though it is through text that narratives and relationships between characters are established, image and colour play fundamental roles in comic books as it is image and colour that shape both Marvel's and DC's universes. Images are multimodal⁴ elements in that various modes such as colour, position, gaze and dress work together to deliver an overall image, in comparison to visual language that seeks to understand the grammatical structure of comic books in relation to how the panels appear in a sequential order that allows the narrative to progress and how these panels are broken down into various categories.

Comic books embody a unique approach to language by delivering a story through the means of images/icons (visual) and writing (text). These images along with their text are produced and reproduced in various panels that convey a narrative. Eisner (1985:8), cited in Bramlett (2012:1), states that "comic books employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language- a literacy form". Visual language opens up a new domain for analysing the structure of comic books from a linguistic perspective in terms of understanding the grammatical properties that go into the structure of visual language. It is crucial to point out that comic books are not a language on their own, but rather are expressed through visual language.

Cohn (2013) builds on the notion of Eisner (1985) by describing and linking the notion of visual language to that of human interaction similar to when an arranged series of sounds become a spoken language, an arranged series of body movements become sign language, and an arranged series of images become a visual language. In comic books, each panel has a sequence that it must follow so that the reader can make sense of the story being expressed.

⁴ Van Leeuwen provides his perspective on the notion of multimodality in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (2015). Multimodality argues that various semiotic modes such as language and image are linked and joined. The study of multimodality draws on the accepted characteristics between these various semiotic modes in a multimodal text or communicative event.

While visual language remains a key feature in comic books, it is not only found in comic books, and should therefore be viewed as two separate entities.

Visual language can be found in many forms. Cohn (2018) describes the visual language used in comic books, but it is also found in children's illustrated books, instructional guides, and cave drawings. It is crucial to point out that not all visual languages are the same. Cohn (2018:2) states that "visual language may differ between the minds of populations of individuals across the world, no single visual language exists anymore than a single spoken language". Making a clear distinction between the different visual languages in the world, Cohn⁵ (2007) discusses the use of Japanese Visual Language (JVL) in manga, stating that "Culturally, thus visual language combines with written language in comics, manga, bandedesinée, etc., uniting their reader and author in a common (visual) linguistic community" (Cohn, 2007:1).

This means that Marvel and DC belong to the same visual linguistic community, and this community would have a specific structure in which they design their comic books to fit in with the society to which the comic book reader belongs. Marvel and DC do share similar elements in relation to the structure of their comic books. A difference can be seen between an American style comic book, such as Wonder Woman, and that of a Japanese manga, such as Tokyo Ghoul, as each of these comic books will follow a different structure and sequence in their comic books.

This grammatical system is as crucial an aspect in the construction of visual language as it is with any other language (verbal or signed language), as we can construct sentences in a verbal language that allow us to express our opinions, perspectives and emotions which is understood through meaning making. This system includes three components, namely: modality (expression), grammar, and meaning. Each of these components influences our understanding and construction of when interaction has taken place. These three components contribute to delivering a narrative to the comic book reader who then interprets the meaning from these images and text that make a comic book.

Comic books are expressed through several modalities, visual and written, each broken down into colour and sound. Sounds are often written out, e.g. "SSHHING" which represents the sound a sword makes when pulled out of a sheath. Modality plays a vital role in delivering the

⁵Cohn's (2007) *Japanese Visual language: The structure of Manga*, he discusses the structure Japanese Visual Language (JVL) used in Manga which differs compared to the visual language used in Marvel and DC comic books.

narrative to the reader like that of the visual modality used in film. While this is a crucial aspect of visual language, this portion of the thesis will discuss the grammatical structure of the images and meaning making from these images. The following section on Multimodality and Gender Identity will elaborate more on the form of expression used in comic books in relation to how women are represented in Marvel and DC comic books.

In order to analyse the grammatical sequence of visual language, one requires a deeper understanding of visual language theory (VLT), which consists of the sub-theory of visual narrative grammar (VNG). Cohn (2018:1) describes VLT as “the structure of drawn images is guided by similar principles as language, foremost a narrative grammar that guides the way in which sequences of images convey meaning”. Since visual language is regarded as being the same as verbal and signed language, this theory provides an interesting and deeper approach to understanding the grammar of visual language. Visual language is like spoken and signed language that follows a grammatical system: “the keystone of this theory is the idea that sequential images use a narrative grammar that is structured and comprehended using similar mechanisms as grammar in verbal and signed language” (Cohn, 2013:1).

These sequential images are interpreted using visual narrative grammar (VNG) as it is through the VNG that one is able to understand the structure that these images follow in order to create a narrative that is comprehensible to the readers: “the structure is separate from meaning, and function to package into well formed as opposed to ill-formed sequence. That is, it constrains sequence to present meaning in ways that make sense, as opposed to those that do not” (Cohn, 2018:2). If one were to look at an instruction manual, the images are placed in a particular order so that meaning can be made from these images, which show the individual assembling the item in the sequence in which the builder needs to follow to successfully come to the end result.

Instruction manuals and comic books serve different purposes, however, each consist of a narrative grammar that needs to be followed for their reader to be able to make meaning from the images. Elaborating on this notion of narrative grammar, Cohn (2018:2) states that “like syntactic structure in sentences this narrative grammar gives categorical roles to individual images units and then organizes those units in hierarchic constituents”, similar to how we, through our spoken interactions, construct our sentences in a sequence that is coherent. These images, through their creators, follow the same principal and can be broken down into hierarchical components.

While the images follow a narrative grammar in terms of how they are structured in a comprehensible sequence, the meaning of these images differ, as Cohn (2018:2) states: “because images contain more semantic information than individual words narrative grammar operates more at a ‘discourse’ level of meaning rather than at a sentence level”. Images which are placed in panels can take on multiple meanings as there is much to work with in an image, namely, the number modes and how the image can be interpreted differently from one society to another, whereas our spoken word is more direct in delivering a meaning in a sentence.

The categorical roles that these image units are placed in follow a pattern that allows the reader to make coherent sense of the narrative that is being displayed. VGN consists of five categories that form a basic narrative category. These are: Establishes (E), Initial (I), Prolongation (L), Peak (P), and Release (R). Cohn (2013) describes these categories as *phases of constituency* and describes a phase as a “coherent piece of a structure, as in syntax. Just as phrases belong to a sentence in syntax, phase belongs to ‘Arc’ in narrative” (Cohn, 2013:421). These phases can be deconstructed in a similar style to that of a sentence using a tree diagram⁶, as shown in figure 1 below. This image displays the various types of basic narrative structures that visual grammar appears in.

Cohn (2018:2-3) defines these categories as “Establisher (E) sets up an interaction without acting upon it, often a passive state. Initial (I) initiates the tension of the narrative are prototypically a preparatory action and/or a source of a path. Prolongation (P) marks the height of narrative tension and point of maximal event structure, prototypically a completed action and/or goal of a path, but also often an interrupted action. Release (R) releases the tension of the interaction, prototypically the coda or aftermath of an action”. These categories can be seen in Cohn’s figure 1 below, as each narrative structure consists of these categories. The image shown in Cohn’s figure 1 is an example and the discussion around this figure is to explain the structure of the panels in comic books, not to analyse it.

⁶ Tree Diagram refers to “a diagram that illustrates the structure of a syntactic constituent and also contains the label for each of its constituents” (Bock and Mheta, 2014:554).

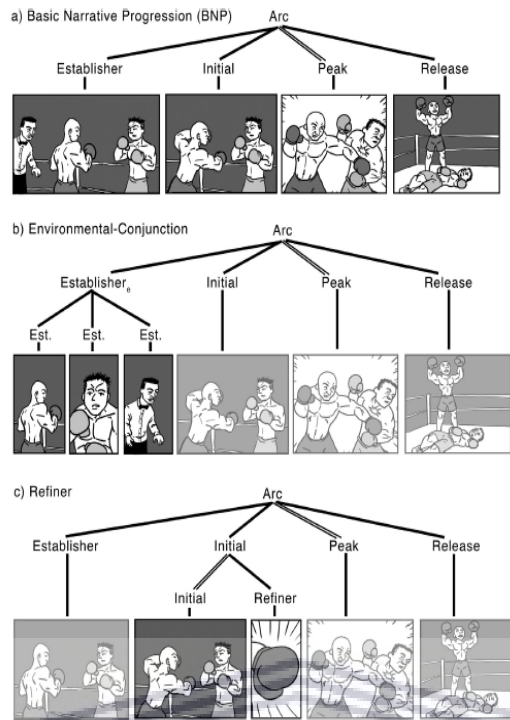


Figure 1 (Cohn, 2018:4)

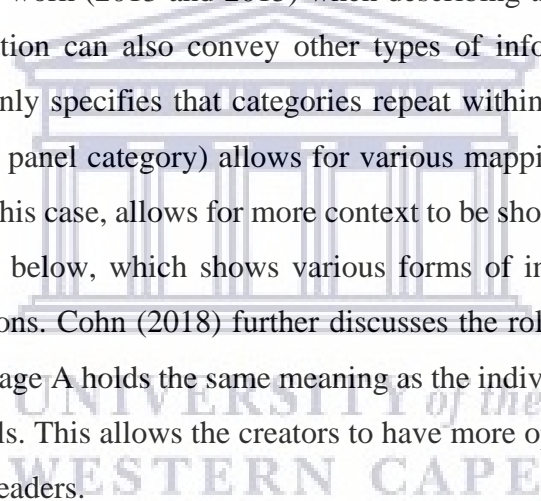
In following this structure, the reader can understand the meaning behind what is being shown in the panels. Cohn (2018:3) states that “through these narrative roles outline their prototypical meaning, full identification of a narrative category involves an interaction between the panel’s content and its context in a global sequence”. Some panels provide more context to the narrative, as shown in image B (Cohn’s figure 1), with Establisher having sub-categories. These panels must be related to each and placed in an ordered sequence. One cannot place the Peak in the beginning of the comic strip as it would not make sense to the reader in image A, as seen in Cohn’s figure 1. The same can be said about the context of the panels – if one were to place an unfamiliar panel in this sequence, it would throw the sequence out of order.

By examining this structure, it becomes clear how visual language and spoken or signed language share similar features, in that when sentences are broken down into their various categories of verb, noun or adverb, it follows a similar breakdown. “Though syntactic categories (like nouns and verbs) have typical mapping to meaning (like objects, events) these are ultimately not how such categories are defined” (Jackendoff, 1990, cited in Cohn, 2018:3). Furthermore, Cohn (2018:3) states that “their definition relies on relational roles within the context of a sequence. Thus, the word dance (semantically, an event) can serve as either a noun (the dance or verb (they dance) depending on its surrounding context. Similarly, a panel of a

passive state may act as an Establisher or a Release, depending on context”. There needs to be a relationship between the panels for the meaning to be understood by the audience, while some panels provide more detail, such as Image B in Cohn’s figure 1, the content and context remain the same.

By way of example, Cohn’s figure 1 displays the basic narrative structure; these types of structures may look familiar; in some cases, these structures may appear in newspaper comic strips. However, not all comic books follow the same structural pattern as shown in figure 1. Some comic books have more complex narrative structures, such as in Cohn’s figure 2 (below). This is an example of the narrative structure and further explains the structure of a more complex or detailed narrative. Conjunction, a familiar term used in linguistics and language, is used in a different context in visual language.

Cohn (2018) cites his own work (2013 and 2015) when describing the role of conjunction in visual language: “conjunction can also convey other types of information beyond scenes. Narratively, conjunction only specifies that categories repeat within a constituent. Thus this narrative pattern (repeated panel category) allows for various mapping to semantics” (Cohn, 2018:4). Conjunctions, in this case, allows for more context to be shown in the comic book, as shown in Cohn’s figure 2 below, which shows various forms of initial interaction through various types of conjunctions. Cohn (2018) further discusses the role of conjunctions on the left. In Cohn’s figure 2, image A holds the same meaning as the individual panels on the right, as they both serve as initials. This allows the creators to have more options in creating a more in-depth narrative for the readers.



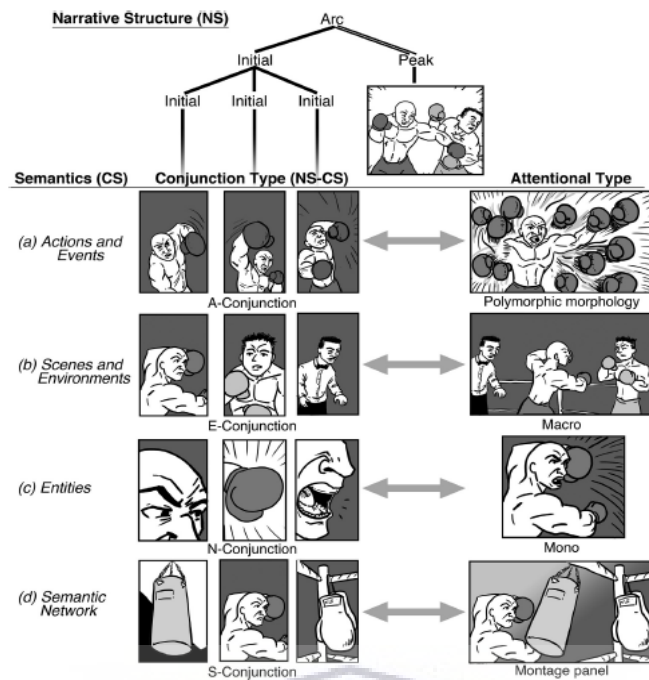


Figure 2 (Cohn, 2018:5)

Referring to Cohn's figure 1 image C, one of the sub-categories of Initial is refiner, which serves a different purpose than a conjunction. The purpose of a refiner is to "modify the information in another 'head' panel (again, double bar lines), and therefore unlike conjunction refiners do not repeat the same narrative role as their head. Rather, they modify the head panel with added focus" (Cohn, 2018:5). This added focus can be seen in Cohn's figure 1 image C, in which the refiner adds more focus on the punch between panels 2 and 3, emphasising how hard the punch was.

Comic books use several visual language structures as some comic books require more complex narratives compared to comic books that follow a basic narrative structure. Marvel and DC comic books follow a different sequence in terms of how their panels appear. The traditional notion requires panels appearing from left to right, but requiring the reader to take note of the top/down sequence panels. Unlike Cohn's examples, Marvel and DC have added text and effects that the readers follow as well, as shown in Marvel's figure 3 below, taken from *Captain Marvel* (2016).

The image on the right appears on a separate page and takes the whole space of this page, while the image on the left is broken into panels. However, the content and the context are related to each other. Cohn's figure 1 were just examples of basic narrative structures that are found in comic books, while in Marvel's figure 3, by way of example, consists of a different structure

in terms of how meaning is made. In Cohn's figure 1, the sequence of the panels is simple to follow, from left to right; the panels follow each other in a coherent sequence. However, the panels in Marvel's figure 3 require the readers to read from left to right but additionally to follow the panels from top to bottom in order to make sense of the story being told. In Marvel's figure 3, the same categories can be applied, even if the panels follow a different sequence. Marvel's figure 3 could be classified as a combination between Environmental-Conjunctions and Refiner, as there are elements of both present.



Captain Marvel (2016) #1
Figure 3.

In Marvel's figure 3, by way of example, the panels could be viewed as follows: the first and second panels can be viewed as Establishers; the third panel would be Initial; the fourth the Refiner as this modifies the information in the third panel if we look beyond the text; the fifth panel would be the Peak as this is the height of the tension; and the final panel would be the Release, which is the release of the tension and the effect of the action taken in the peak. While the sequence of the panels differs from the traditional left to right reading style associated with other forms of literacy or the examples Cohn (2018) has explained, the narrative categories remain consistent with the added text that guides the reader to follow the narrative. The images used without the text would be coherent and the context would remain the same.

DC's figure 4 below is taken from DC's *Wonder Woman #71* (2019). It follows a similar structure as in Marvel's figure 3, in that the reader still needs to follow the pages from left to right. The panels on the left follow in sequence of each other, while the panels on the right follow a top/down and left to right sequence. However, all the panels are coherent and remain in the same context of each other. DC's figure 4 consists of the same narrative categories that are present in visual language, but the order may appear differently from that order shown in Marvel's figure 3; page 14 takes the entire space of the page. The three panels on the left in figure 4 could be regarded as being the Establishers with sub-establishers, as Maggie (the character in DC's figure 4) dives into the cave, setting up an interaction. Panels 4 and 5 would be initial, as in these panels the tension begins to build.



Figure 4: *Wonder Woman #71* (2019:12-14)

Panels 6, 7 and 8 would be the peaks of the narrative arc; the reason would be that these panels mark the height of the tension as Maggie is met with glowing red eyes in the cave and prepares for battle in panel 8. Panel 9 would be the release of tension as Maggie comes face to face with the unknown creature, a minotaur. If one examines Cohn's figure 1, Marvel's figure 3 and DC's figure 4, the use of Prolongation is not present, as this category is not regarded as one of the core categories in the narrative categories. Cohn (2012:425) states that prolongation "could

easily be omitted with no semantic consequences for the sequence. However, narratively, it holds off the peak for another panel”. In a sense, prolongation is added to build more tension before the peak. Marvel’s figure 3, panel 5, without the text, could be considered as prolongation. If one excludes panel 5 from the sequence, it would not change the sequence as Maggie would still come face to face with the unknown red-eyed creature.

Omitting text in comic books could become problematic as the text builds on each other and creates a relationship between the images. Therefore, in Marvel and DC comic books, the panels are related to each other via images as well as related by text. Cohn (2012:245) discusses the purpose of prolongation further in building tension: “This allows an author to draw out a scene or perhaps to end a page (or daily episode) with a Prolongation to leave the reader in suspense until its resolution”. As seen in the example below, DC’s figure 5 displays the use of prolongation taken from the same title in the example in DC’s figure 4. It shows the comic book ending on a high tension.



Figure 5 Wonder Woman #71 (2019:24)

DC’s figure 5 displays Wonder Woman and Maggie after they have defeated the Minotaur, but this is not the case as it comes back. The panel can be considered as a Prolongation as the author has ended the comic book on a suspenseful note. In this case, omitting the prolongation would not be a choice as the author has chosen to end the comic book on this note, meaning

that readers would have to purchase the next addition of the comic book to follow the narrative. Marvel and DC comic books often end their comic books in this manner as it requires their readers to purchase the next addition of the comic book. This would make prolongation as vital as the other core narrative categories in this context.

If one examines Marvel's figure 3 and DC's figure 4, there are similarities between Marvel and DC comic books in terms of the visual language structure that is followed. Grammatically, Marvel and DC comic books rely on more complex and detailed narrative categories and structures. The panels follow a sequential pattern by appearing in a coherent and context-related manner. However, the format in which the panels appear changed. The format of the panels, as mentioned previously, requires the reader to read from left to right and top to bottom compared to the basic narrative structure, as discussed by Cohn (2018). Visual language allows for a more in-depth and critical analysis into the grammatical structure of comic books.

Through the creation of narrative categories, it is possible to break down comic books into smaller categories to understand the process that comic books go through in order to create a plot and meaning. It is through visual language that the readers begin to shape an understanding of what is being displayed in the images as these images are coded with meaning and decoded by the readers. The readers of comic books can comprehend the meaning that is being made in comic books through this grammatical structure and the sequential images. Beyond meaning making from the grammatical structure, the images play a fundamental role in comic books in delivering a visual narrative to the audience. These images represent several aspects such as race, sexuality, ethnicity, sex and gender identity, all of which have become talking points in recent years in the comic book community.

2.4. Multimodality and Gender Identity

A crucial aspect of this thesis is to understand the representation of female masculinity, and by extension the female identity, in Marvel and DC comic books. This portion of the thesis elaborates on the aspect of modality, which is one of the components in the grammatical structure of visual language. In doing so, this portion combines two concepts for discussion, multimodality and gender identity. These two concepts provide an interesting perspective into the various modes that assist in the representation of female masculinity and gender identity. Marvel and DC comics are set in fictional worlds in which multimodality is fundamental in delivering their stories to their viewers, therefore, the combinational approach provides a more

in-depth analysis into the relationship between multimodality and gender identity in comic books.

Machin, Calado-Coulthard and Milani (2016) discuss their approach to understanding multimodality in relation to gender, language and discourse: “the critical approach we have in mind for multimodal approach in gender, language, discourse will certainly be interested in understanding the effects of a particular semiotic selection out of a pool of potential alternatives. It is in these choices that ideology and power are encoded” (Machin *et al.*, 2016: 304). Taking into consideration the various modes used in multimodality, gender can be expressed through a number of these modes; however, in some cases, certain modes are applied while others are excluded, while on an ideological level, some modes are used to represent inaccurate portrayals of gender identity and associated roles assigned to these gender identities.

Multimodality can be described as “the importance of taking into account semiotics other than language-in-use, such as image, music, gesture” (Iedema, 2003:33). Multimodality consists of various modes, whether verbal or non-verbal which all contribute to the representation of identity in comic books. These modes can be translated into meaning making, and can be described as “a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for meaning making” (Kress, 2009:79). This refers to the notion of visual language as modes which are socially and culturally expressed to hold meaning, meaning that is coded by the creators and decoded by the readers.

Modes⁷ play a crucial role in the development of comic books. However, like the notion of visual language, modes differ from society to society. Yang (2016) discussed that multimodality presumes that modes, like language, are influenced by culture, history and social purposes to grasp social functions. However, while this notion does hold some ground, modes and the representation of female superheroes do change in audience groups in similar cultures, e.g. Wonder Woman in *DC Superhero Girls*, a television programme aimed at children, appears dressed in a more conservative outfit due to the target audience, compared to Wonder Woman in DC comic books, aimed at teenagers and adults.

As stated in a previous section of this literature review, comic books have an influential role in the representation of gender identity and roles in society. Brown (1999) mentions that comic

⁷ Yang (2016:1598) cites the work of O’Halloran, Tan, Smith and Podpisov (2011) who define the wider notion of multimodality as “the interaction of multiple semiotic resources such as language, gestures, dress, architecture, proximity lighting, movement, gaze, camera angle and so on”.

books create an understanding of how gender norms should be perceived in society. Turberville (2016) points out that the comic book industry and male-orientated readers are behind these representations. It should be made clear that the comic book industry has played a part in reproducing inaccurate representations. However, some creators in the industry have made attempts to bring gender equality and diversity into comic books. This move for equal representation of gender and diversity has been met with backlash, as discussed under the reference #Comicsgate.

Comic books are mirrors of society often taking cues from real-life world events. However, equal gender representation has become a debate in the comic book community. Gender is referred to as the “psychological or culture rather than the biological connotations. If the proper terms sex are male and female, the corresponding term of gender is masculine and feminine” (Stroller, 2006:36). The definition provides insight into the understanding of gender, as some view it as a binary system in which if one is born a woman her gender therefore must be feminine and she must embody the traits that are associated with her gender, while others view gender as being fluid.

The representation of gender identity is associated with outdated gender stereotypes⁸ in which female characters are often represented, such as Facciani, Warren and Vendemia’s (2015:3) citation of the work by Glick and Fiske (1997) on sexism in comic books: “Benevolent sexism involves viewing women in stereotypical and restrictive roles (i.e. caregiver) which require the protection of men”. On this point, Lavign (2015:133) states that “Mainstream superhero text have generally conformed to strict gender stereotypes, presenting men as hypermasculine authority figures (strong, powerful, aggressive and usually anti-social) and women as cleavage-baring sex objects generally located in patriarchal sites of power struggles and violence”. Comic books that follow this stereotypical representation of gender reinforce traditional gender norms and roles using multimodal expression.

Comic books have recently become the centre of discussion amongst the women’s movement, in that comic books still rely on outdated bodies, norms, roles and stereotypes which misrepresent women: “Women in comic books are depicted in a hypersexualized way, with physical beauty often taking precedence over their achievements and non-physical qualities” (Brown, 2011, cited in Facciani *et al.*, 2015:3). Through various modes, this representation of

⁸ Gender Stereotypes refer to a “collection of gender-specific attributes or traditional norms that differentiate typical feminine behaviour patterns from typical behaviour patterns in society” (Mayes and Valentine, 1979, cited in Coyne *et al.*, 2014:417).

women becomes a reality in comic books, as these modes all contribute to an overall product that contributes to the larger ideological perspective that societies hold regarding gender behaviour. There are several modes that comic books employ; some modes are more prominent than others such as images, text and colour, while other modes that are employed in comic books include gaze, gestures and dress.

The female body is a focal point in the inaccurate representation of gender identity in the sense that women are represented with unrealistic body types compared to their male counterparts. Trina Robbins in her work, *Gender Differences in Comics* (2002), describes the female body as having unrealistic bodies that feature blimp-sized breasts, a narrow waist that would be impossible for any human to have, and legs that exceed the rest of their body. In contrast, Roblou (2012) refers to the male body in comic books as an outward expression that is related to male dominance and masculinity.

In representing men and women differently, comic books shape an ideology in terms of body image, as a woman's body is represented as a sex object unlike her male counterpart, whose body is idealistic. The reason behind this representation can be linked back to the readers of comic books. Scott (2015:155) explains "they [female characters] are drawn in action but frequently contained by a presumed male gaze". A similar notion is discussed by Natale (2013:78): "Female superheroes portray a kind of imagined fantasy of the heterosexual male gaze, representing the large breast ingénue of the Western heterosexual male imagination".

Female superheroes in Marvel and DC comic books are represented through a western ideology with regards to the female body, as the female superheroes are represented as being sexual objects for the male reader's pleasure. Citing the work of Chenault (2007), Natale (2013:77) states that "the creators of comic books are almost entirely male, and thus the gaze is male from both the production and consumption perspective". Female superheroes with unrealistic features are created by men for men, however, as pointed out by Robbins (2002) and Scott (2015), female characters are represented as being equal in strength and ability to their male counterparts. Female superheroes can perform the same acts as their male counterparts; however, they are represented and drawn as sexualized objects to distract readers from viewing female characters as taking on or even outshining their male counterparts.

Building on the notion of gaze as a mode and the images of bodies in comic books, scholars have noted that the positioning of the bodies is a crucial factor in contributing to the way women are represented in comic books. Positioning female characters in a certain manner

allows for more prominent features to be seen, e.g. breast and backside. Scott (2015) cites the work of Carolynn Cocca's (2014) *The Broken Back Test: A quantitative and qualitative analysis of portrayals of women in mainstream superhero comics, 1993-2013*. Cocca (2014) states that female characters are positioned in a manner that is not equal to their male counterparts, and in some cases, female characters are positioned with unusual arched backs; this is for them to display all the curves of the body both front and back.

The positioning of the female body in comic books is often represented in a sexual manner. Natale (2013) notes that female characters are often represented in some form of bondage, which has become a common trait with women in comic books. This notion can be linked back to satisfying the male audience. While the positions that these female superheroes are in are not explicit, they are suggestive, such as in the case of Wonder Woman who is often portrayed in some form of bondage. Through this mode of positioning, the female body becomes an object that satisfies the male reader. It points out the larger problem of the gender imbalance that plagues the comic book community as male characters are not represented in the same manner.

A superhero's identity is crucial for their survival as it is through their superhero identities that characters can perform heroic acts; a superhero's costume is an expression of their identity as these costumes become signals of who they are. Female superhero costumes are provocative by design, as some costumes, such as Catwoman's and Black Widow's, are skintight. "The costume itself is representative of the role the specific hero plays. Batman's costume implies 'night, fear, the supernatural' while Iron Man literally embodies his power" (Reynolds, 1992:26). The costumes of female superheroes become an outward representation of the type of women these characters are. These costumes are drawn with the purpose to please most male readers as female costumes often feature low-cut tops/skirts and are revealing.

In the case of Batman and Iron Man, their costumes represent their wealth, strength and intelligence, aspects that men should idolize. Catwoman's and Black Widow's costumes represent the use of their sexuality and body as their weapon of choice to overcome their foes. Some might argue that Catwoman and Black Widow are characters that are considered in the femme fatale category, therefore the reasoning behind their costumes is acceptable. Female superheroes are represented in a similar style in the sense that their breasts and backsides are the focal point of their costumes. This contributes to the issue of how female superheroes are

represented using various modes in comic books. It delivers an image that the reader begins to assume is the norm in representing women in a hyper-sexualized manner.

If one were to look at the broader concept of gender identity, one would note that there is a larger discussion at hand in terms of equal representation for both men and women in comic books, both genders are in trouble with inaccurate representation. Robbins (2002) discusses this issue of representation in that both male and female characters are fantasies which young male readers aspire to be or desire. Women are represented as sexual fantasies or sex objects of young men who have few experiences with real women. Male superheroes are represented as being the ideal man with the ideal muscular body for young male readers to aspire to.

These modes contribute to the larger overall image that becomes part of the narrative in comic books through various panels and images that are coded with meaning, which in turn is decoded and interpreted by the reader. Natale (2013) cites the *Wizard Entertainment "How to Draw" guidebook* (2005) on how images in comic books are coded. This guidebook, created by members of the comic book industry, provides details on the coding of images in comic books. Natale (2013) describes the details the guidebook provides when coding female characters. As previously discussed, breasts are a focal point in both Marvel and DC comic books in their representation of female superheroes. This is ironic, because the guidebook states that breast size is not crucial in drawing female superheroes, yet creators continue to draw female characters with blimp-sized breasts.

Furthermore, Natale (2013) cites the guidebook's recommendation on how coded female characters should appear, by stating that women should be drawn with an hourglass figure compared to the V-shape for male characters, that facial features and hair should appear to be sensuous, and costumes should be revealing. In following similar guides, comic book creators begin to formulate a set norm of design when it comes to female characters, which gives shape to an ideology of how women's bodies should be represented in comic books. Through these modes, it becomes more apparent and re-affirms the gender imbalance in comic books as they contribute to a misleading and unrealistic notion of representation of women in this domain. Marvel and DC comic books follow the same manner in representation as their female superheroes appear in the stylistic choices mentioned in the guidebook.

In coding these images in this manner, it delivers a message to the reader that female superheroes are not equal to their male counterparts. It further shapes how women are represented in society as being sex objects. "The constant representation of women as fantasy

figures of the male spectator turns the women of visual culture into objects. Imagistic discourse suggests that men have bodies that will prevail, that are strong and impenetrable. Female bodies are not represented as active agents in this way, but instead as breakable, take able bodies” (McCaughey, 1997:36). Female superheroes and their bodies become objects of an ideal world designed in the fantasy world of men that delivers an image of unrealistic body features and hypersexual women. McCaughey’s (1997) notion addresses a current issue in the larger domain of society and speaks volumes to how women are represented in comic books.

In selecting various modes, comic book creators have shaped a norm in terms of how a female superhero and other characters should be represented in their work. These modes are selected to please the male audience by creating a fantasy in which this audience can delight in; this selection further contributes to an already dominated hegemonic status quo in comic books. Marvel and DC comic books are viewed as the two leading figures in the comic book industry as their comic books are the most popular amongst the comic book community. If they were to change how they design their female characters, other comic book creators might follow. However, this is a tall order to meet in the sense that if we look at the viewers of comic books being largely male, the chances are slim. This would require active change from the comic book community. While there has been an increase in female readers and creators in the comic book industry, perhaps change could be on the horizon.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the concepts associated with this thesis. This discussion included the notions of hegemonic masculinity to female masculinity, visual language, and a combined discussion on multimodality and gender identity. The discussion around hegemonic masculinity and female masculinity provided insight into the portrayal of masculinity in comic books through a hegemonic perspective. Furthermore, the discussion around female masculinity sought to expand this notion to include more women who do not identify as being queer but embody masculine traits.

Visual language provided insight into the structural components of comic books in terms of how comic books follow a grammatical structure that allow the reader to make meaning of the narrative and images. Multimodality and gender identity discussed the functions of several modes that contribute to the portrayal of gender identity in comic books, and how these modes contribute to the overall representation of women in comic books.

The following chapter, chapter 3, discusses the theoretical approach this thesis undertook.



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Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1. Introduction

The theoretical framework of this thesis is made up of several critical social theories providing a wide frame for perspective and analysis. The frameworks used include Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Intertextuality, Dialogicality, Queer Theory, and Intersectionality. Dialogicality will explore the numerous voices within the comic book, and how these voices interact with each other. Queer theory examines the hetero-norm and hypersexualized domain of comic books; and Intersectionality examines the various aspects that contribute to the characters' personalities and overall representation.

Through this diverse approach to analysing the research, this chapter provides a wider perspective into the representation of female superheroes in Marvel and DC comic books. In terms of the various modes that contribute to this representation, the manner in which text is applied to shape the narratives and the relationship between text and images will also be explored.

3.2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

As mentioned in the previous chapter under Multimodality and Gender Identity, the fundamental core of comic books relies on the use of several modes to create the fictional world that comic book characters are a part of. In terms of analysing how these modes operate, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is a crucial instrument for gaining insight into the functionality of these modes. More specifically, the function of MDA in relation to this study can provide an in-depth understanding of the role these modes play in comic books.

O'Halloran (2011:2) states that MDA "is concerned with theory and analysis of semiotic resources and the semantic expansion which occur as semiotic choices combine in multimodal phenomena". Furthermore, according to Yang (2016:1596), who cites Jewitt (2009), "multimodality describes approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language and which attend to the full range of communication forms people use-image, gestures, gaze and posture and so-on and the relationship between them". As

mentioned previously, modes such as image, text, colour, gaze, gesture and dress (costume) all work together in the development and delivery of the story.

As discussed in section 2.4 above on Multimodality and Gender Identity, modes play a significant role; these modes are not picked at random, and each mode is added with a sense of purpose. Kress (2012), cited in Yang (2016:1597), points this out: “in a multimodality approach all modes are framed as one field, as one domain. Jointly they are texted as one connected cultural resource for meaning-making by members of a social group at a particular moment”. By combining various modes, comic book writers and artists can reference significant moments taken from real-life events or moments in popular culture. This makes comic books and their characters subject to a multimodal analysis. In Marvel’s figure 6 below, we can see an example of how comic books replicate a pop culture moment through modes.



Captain Marvel #2 (2012) and Rosie the Riveter
Figure 6

Marvel’s figure 6 showcases this notion, brought forward by Kress (2012), in that modes such as gesture, gaze, colour, positioning, and overall image bring together one cultural resource for meaning making. This meaning can come from several sources but all with a common understanding that requires the audience to have previous knowledge about Rosie the Riveter⁹

⁹ Rosie the Riveter was created by J. Howard Miller from Westinghouse along with the slogan, “We Can Do It”. The purpose of this creation was towards the war effort in 1942 (Santana, 2016).

and the role her image played during World War II. This is a significant use of modes to recreate an iconic cultural image, because this edition of *Captain Marvel* (2012) was the first edition in which Carol Danvers appeared as Captain Marvel. This indicates how text relates to each other and, in the instance, how images relate to each other.

3.3. Intertextuality

The notion of intertextuality was introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in the early 1900s; however, it was not until the late 1960s that the term intertextuality was popularised by Julia Kristeva. Intertextuality refers to “the ways in which text and ways of talking refer to and build on other text and discourse” (Kristeva, 1986, cited in Johnstone, 2008:164). A text is often, in some cases, borrowed from another text in the sense that the author has placed it in a specific context to make meaning or refer to another larger context. Johnstone (2008:164) states that “text can bear intertextual traces of other text in many ways, ranging from the most direct repetition to the most indirect allusion”.

The application of intertextuality in this thesis is to analyse and interpret the textual properties collected from the selected Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman comic books. This thesis seeks to expand this notion of intertextuality to images. The application of intertextuality is often associated with verbal/written text, however, images can be intertextual as well, as Wang (2014:276) states (also in Roland Barthes, 1977:38): “the notion to encompass a wider perspective by treating the interrelationship of different modes in a way which is analogous to that of intertextuality”.

Wang (2014) cites the work of Barthes (1977), and expanded the notion of intertextuality to include images and discusses the relationship between text and images as being comparable to each other. “Barthes also used the term ‘relay’ to refer to the ‘complementary’ relationship between text and images as in for example cartoons, comic strips and narrative films, noting the paradoxical case where the image is constructed according to the text” (Wang, 2014:276). Therefore, for meaning to be made, the visual construction of a comic book needs to be related to the text, as these two elements work together to make a narrative.

Intertextuality can be found in various forms of spheres such as art, films, music and, in this case, comic books. The front cover of *Captain Marvel #2* in Marvel’s figure 6 is an example of how an image can refer or build on another image, in terms of shaping meaning and

understanding in context. Walter Werner (2004) provides an interesting perspective into the relationship between intertextuality and images. Werner (2004:64) states “whenever a pictorial image is read in terms of-or through, against, alongside another image or a surrounding set of images and words, intertextuality is at work; meaning assigned to the images from those that would be drawn if it were interpreted in isolation”.

In relation to the notion discussed by Werner (2004), Oostendorp (2015:52) discussed that “although the text might shift or lose their original meaning, other meaning making potential (such as being linked to other societal discourse) might be created”. This notion discussed by Oostendorp (2015) highlights a crucial aspect that comic books take into consideration, in terms of relating societal issues within their comic books. While comic books may incorporate text or images that may lose their original meaning, the potential for a new meaning is created. For instance, figure 6, in which Captain Marvel appears, is positioned in the same stance as Rosie the Riveter, however the phrase “*We can do it!*” is not included in the front cover of Captain Marvel.

The meaning can still be interpreted without the text through the mode of positioning, in that the manner in which Captain Marvel is positioned resembles Rosie the Riveter. Figure 6 alludes to the notion and manner in which comic books incorporate iconic images and text within their work. This allows the reader to associate the image or text within a specific social or cultural context. This issue of Captain Marvel was the first to be published by a female lead writer, thus the meaning around the use of this image alludes to this historic moment. Even without the text the comic books convey the same message with the exclusion of the text. Werner (2004) discusses how the interpretations of these images are affected by both internal and external forces beyond the image frame.

Beyond the notion of how images are interpreted, Werner (2004) discusses the various forms of intertextuality that can be found in images, such as binary juxtaposing and visual quoting. Werner (2004:2) states that “intertextuality may operate within the frame of a single image. Even though a picture may be simple in design and contain few elements, relationships amongst the parts can evoke interest and evoke meaning”. Comic books may employ various themes or images in which the reader may identify from other forms of the larger social discourse.

This notion of how our interpretations of images that are affected by both internal and external forces can be linked back to Kress’ (2012) statement on how modes are treated as a single connected cultural device for meaning making by individuals from a social group at a certain

moment. It is the external forces of our surroundings and the internal forces such as our perspective that affect our overall perception of an image, in terms of what we identify in the frame or cover. Intertextuality provides an opportunity for this thesis to examine the intertextual variables in the data; this can be either in a text or an image, as seen in the example of Marvel's figure 6. Furthermore, the application of this concept was to examine how the relationship between text and images contribute to the development of the narrative.

3.4. Dialogicality

A term closely related to the notion of intertextuality is dialogicality, which can be described as “Two voices, two meanings and two expressions and all while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they as it were know each other just as two exchanges in dialogue know each other, it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other” (Bakhtin, 1981:324). Bakhtin (1981:324) describes the notion of double-voiced discourse as “always internally dialogized. Examples of this would be comic, ironic and parodic discourse, the refracting discourse of a narrator, refracting discourse in the language of character and finally the discourse of a whole incorporated genre”.

Comic books, or rather comic book creators, employ dialogic features in their narratives so that there are several voices coming through in a comic ranging from the narrator, character to character, character to themselves (internal dialogue), and writer to reader. Rick Hudson discusses the application of dialogicality in his work, *The Derelict Fairground: A Bakhtinian Analysis of the Graphic Novel Medium* (2010). Hudson (2010:41) states that “as the graphic novel is usually the product of (at least) two active creators - the writer and artist - and has two components - picture and words - the media is intrinsically dialogic as it is born out of a dialogic creative relationship”. Hence, through this creative relationship, comic books are dialogic due to the nature of their creation.

The application of dialogicality to this thesis is to provide an in-depth analysis into the double-voiced discourse, by examining the way these double voices appear in comic books, specifically in the data used in this study from Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman. Comic, ironic and parodic discourse are dialogized within and present various voices, as Bakhtin (1981:324-325) explains, “all these discourses are double-voiced and internally dialogized. A potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfold, a concentrated dialogue of two

voices, two world views, two languages”. Comic book creators often place several viewpoints and voices in their work.

Dialogicality provides an interesting opportunity to show how comic books function in terms of bringing a perspective and a voice across to indicate that authors and characters are speaking to the reader about real-life issues. This can be seen in several comic books around the period of World War II in which Wonder Woman encouraged children to collect scrap metal for the war (Scott, 2011). Similar to this is Marvel making reference to Rosie the Riveter on the front cover of *Captain Marvel #2* (2012), which was led by its first female writer.

3.5. Queer Theory

In examining female masculinity and gender identity, queer theory provides a broader understanding for analysing the representation of female masculinity and identity in Marvel and DC comic books. Annamarie Jagose (1996) and Susie Jolly (2000) have indicated that the term *queer* was used a derogator. Jolly (2002:2) explains “the word ‘queer’ originally an insult for marginalized sexualities and other ‘deviants’ was in the late 80’s reclaimed and invested with a new meaning by activist in America”. Jolly (2000:2) goes on to describe queer theory as “an approach open to all those by the hegemony of heterosexual norms-whether they themselves were gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, transgender, transsexual, celibate, undecided, SM, hermaphrodite, androgynous”.

Queer theory examines issues that are outside the domain of the hetero-norm and critically discusses and analyses these issues that challenge and deviate from heteronormativity. Marvel and DC comic books operate in this hetero-norm, as both comic books have an imbalance between the representation of their male and female superheroes. In terms of this thesis, queer theory provides insight into how comic books follow the hetero-norm and challenge it. Oswald *et al.* (2005), cited in Few-Demo *et al.* (2016), describes the purpose of queer theory as “an in-depth perspective into various aspects that influence heteronormativity and seeks to understand how fundamental elements contribute to certain individuals being superior over others”.

Female superheroes are represented as being sexual objects for the male readers’ enjoyment, while male superheroes are represented as being an ideal image. The application of queer theory provides a space to discuss and examine the notion of female masculinity, a form of masculinity that has left the male body; doing so goes against the hetero-norm ideal thought of

masculinity. As mentioned in the literature review under the discussion of hegemonic masculinity to female masculinity, one of the objectives of this thesis is to expand the concept of female masculinity to include all women who ascribe to the notion of female masculinity regardless of them being queer or not.

3.6. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the final theoretical approach used in this thesis. Intersectionality “asserts that both our own, inner understanding of self and the kind of access, opportunity and treatment we receive are the product of multiple and intersecting systems of social classification” (Levon, 2015:297). McCall (2005:1771) refers to intersectionality as “the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation-as itself a central category of analysis”. Marvel and DC comic books provide an interesting site to apply this theory as the characters in both comic books have several intersecting factors of social classification that shape how they are treated by the comic book community, and how they are represented.

Thus, intersectionality provides a thoughtful lens into the social classification that contributes to Marvel’s Captain Marvel and DC’s Wonder Woman. The theory of intersectionality has contributed significantly to the field of gender studies, as scholars McCall (2005) and Levon (2015) have cited, hence how it applies to how female masculinity is represented in Marvel and DC comic books. Intersectionality can be traced back to the 1980s, when it was developed by black feminist academics such as Bell Hooks and Patricia Hill Collin and those working in the field of the sociology of gender and ethnic separation (Levon, 2015). The notion of intersectionality was created by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 when she examined the issues that black women face in the United States of America when it came to employment.

Intersectionality theory can be viewed through three core beliefs. The first principle is *lived experience*, which refers to how social forces influence and constrict observed practices by classifying and examining the multitude of categories, beliefs and forces that support any observed social phenomenon (Levon, 2015:297). Matsuda (1991:1189), cited in Levon (2015:297), describes *lived experience* as “‘asking the other question’: When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this’”. These social forces help us identify several issues in comic books when examining the representation of female superheroes. One needs to apply

the same method that Matsuda (1991) followed when confronted with an image in Marvel and DC comic books.

The second aspect of intersectionality is that “intersections are *dynamic*, and emerge in specific social, historical, and interactional configurations” (Levon, 2015:297). According to Staunæs (2003, cited in Levon, 2015:298), “the principle of dynamism pushes us to adopt a process-centered approach to intersectionality, one in which we explore how practices (be they institutional or individual) contribute to the racializing and gendering, for instance of specific individuals, activities and representation”. This system provides an in-depth analysis of the social forces that assist in the representation of female masculinity and identity, by examining the institutional component of Marvel and DC that determines how female characters are represented in their comic books.

The final system that shapes intersectionality is that ‘dynamic’ intersections “not only intersect but also mutually constitute one another” (Levon, 2015: 298). Mutual Constitution affirms that intersections are not just where separate and pre-existing connections overlap, but also shape these ‘dynamic’ categories. Levon (2015:298) explains that “mutual constitution maintains that constructs such as class, race and gender do not exist as entities unto themselves. Instead, they crucially depend for their meaning on their relationship to the other categories with which they intersect”. Intersectionality theory provides an interesting perspective towards examining female masculinity and identity in Marvel and DC comic books, as there are a number of social forces that intersect with each other and result in the character either being accepted by the comic book community, or rejected based on race, gender, class and sexuality.

The characters, Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, have social forces such as gender, sexuality, class and race. These social forces contribute to their identity and how they are perceived by their audience. Hence, the application of intersectionality is to deconstruct and examine the social forces that contribute towards the identities of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. One should bear in mind that there is a difference between the notion of interaction and intersection, an important distinction that Levon (2015:298) makes clear: “the difference between an interaction and an intersection is that in the case of the former, there is a necessary assumption of independence between the categories in question”. In other words, when things interact with each other, they can still be regarded as having independence.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter outlined the theoretical framework of this thesis, by providing a background of the theoretical approaches that are applied to the data. This theoretical framework covered a variety of theoretical approaches that all contribute to a wider understanding of the various aspects that shape the characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. The application of these theories is tested in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, in terms of understanding and analysing the multimodal components that contribute to the visual appearance of the characters, the dynamic relationship between textual and pictorial components along with the dialogical aspects, and finally queer and intersectional components that contribute to the development and understanding of the characters.



Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology and the data collecting process this thesis took to collect and analyse the data of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. The data collected was from a range of DC and Marvel comic books related to the characters, as the characters have spanned across various decades, from the first appearance of Wonder Woman in 1941, to Captain Marvel in 1967 and 1968, when Captain Marvel made his first solo appearance. The data collection process came to an end in 2019, as this was the recent portrayal of the characters and when this thesis began with analysing the data.

4.2. Research Design

The aim of this thesis was to understand the visual representation of female masculinity, by questioning the various semiotic modes that are used in the representation of women in Marvel and DC comic books. This thesis followed a qualitative approach to collect and analyse the data, as elaborated by Sharan Merriam on the purpose of qualitative research in *Qualitative Research in practice* (2002). Merriam (2002) states that there are numerous constructions and interpretations of a phenomenon that are fluid and alter over a period. Qualitative researchers are concerned with comprehending what those interpretations mean at a certain stage in time and a certain circumstance. One of the objectives of this thesis is to understand the representation of women over a period of time, hence following a qualitative approach to collect the data was a suitable approach.

Comic books are regarded as reflecting society's perspectives and ideologies in their narratives. The data for this research provided insight into the perspectives and ideologies that shaped these characters in each time period, as the data obtained spans several decades. Thus, the reasoning behind the data collection approach for this thesis was to understand the interpretations behind the representation of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel in a certain time period and certain circumstances. For example, the following chapters observe the role of Wonder Woman during World War II, and how a Captain Marvel front cover addressed issues of race and inequality.

This thesis aimed to understand the meaning conveyed by the visual representation of gender in comic books, as it is constructed around a societal notion of gender norms and roles. As previously mentioned, comic books often make reference to various aspects of society in terms of constructing narratives, events and characters based on societal perspectives. This is a suitable approach for this thesis in terms of the nature of qualitative research requiring the researcher to gain an understanding of various perspectives, opinions and representation within society. Merriam (2002:6-7) describes the process of qualitative research as “Data are collected through interviews, observations or document analysis. These data are inductively analyzed to identify a recurring pattern or common themes that cut across the data”. This thesis collected data that has a recurring pattern, this pattern being the sexualized representation of women in comic books.

This recurring pattern is not an isolated pattern that is associated with one character or certain publishers. It is a pattern that spans across various characters in DC and Marvel comic books in which women are represented from the perspective of the male gaze. By creating and reinforcing this pattern of how women should be represented, it has made it more difficult to break this pattern. The audience has become accustomed to the appearance of a character and change can spark a movement. Therefore, a qualitative approach to collecting the data was more suitable for this thesis, as this research is interpreting the various aspects within the data that contribute to the representation of the characters Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel.

This research includes several online articles that give their perspectives and opinions on the various characters and the portrayal of these characters within their respective comic book universes. Although these articles are not the main portion of data, the purpose of these articles is to provide insight into the perspectives of the comic book community, such as the #Comicsgate movement. These articles give a sense of the complexities and perspectives from members of the comic book community in terms of the changes made to characters that were traditionally males and characters that challenge the heteronormative behaviour in comic books. The articles the data collected focused on the multimodal and textual elements that are featured in the selected comic book data, instead of collecting the thoughts and perspectives from a focus group or an individual.

Furthermore, in chapter 5, this thesis indicated the numbers and percentages of the editorial teams of both DC and Marvel publishers. The purpose of these numbers and percentages was to provide insight into the roles that women have in these editorial teams, and are not the main

focus of the data. In terms of the data collecting process, the data was collected from selected Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman comic books that varied across the various ages¹⁰ associated with the comic book genre. Collecting data from various ages gives the data a wider scope in analysing the development of the characters in terms of character development and visual representation. These ages have been established in the domain of comic books as a feature in both Marvel and DC comic book universes. This thesis considers the Modern Age to be from 1985 until 2010, and considers 2011 to the present as the New Age of comic books. It is unknown as to what the New Age of comic books will bring.

Before the data collection took place, this thesis sought to include data of the various portrayals of women in comic books, in their various roles such as superhero, villain, sidekick, or damsel in distress from each of the publishers. However, this would have made the data collection process more difficult in terms of narrowing down the roles the characters represented and how these characters have developed throughout the various ages. Therefore, the decision was to focus on the roles of women superheroes from both the DC and Marvel comic books.

Marvel and DC comic books are the leading publishers in the comic book community with a variety of characters throughout their comic book universes; both publishers have iconic characters associated with their brands. Both the DC and Marvel comic book universes are home to several women superheroes, each with their own unique narratives, personalities and purposes. Two characters stood out above the others, Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. These characters each had their own history, narrative and development, yet shared similarities with each other.

Wonder Woman was selected as the character from the DC comic book universe. Wonder Woman was the first woman character to be introduced into a mainstream comic book and the first woman character in the DC comic book universe. There is extensive research done on the characters of Wonder Woman from different perspectives, namely Les Daniels' (2004) work titled *Wonder Woman: The Complete History*, and *Wonder Woman: Feminist Icon of the 1940s*, by Angelica Delaney (2014).

Narrowing down a woman superhero from Marvel was a challenge, due to the Marvel universe having strong and popular women superheroes with interesting backgrounds, such as Storm, Jane Foster and Riri Williams. Captain Marvel stood out, as the character of Captain Marvel

¹⁰The ages are listed as the following: Golden Age (1930-1950), Silver Age (1956-1970), Bronze Age (1970-1985), and Modern Age (1985-present) Petty (2006).

had gone through various title holders, with the current Captain Marvel being a white woman and the previous title holder an African American woman. Carol Danvers assumed the title of Captain Marvel in 2012, therefore her character has not been researched and would provide a new perspective in relation to research objectives of the thesis. The reason for the selection of these two characters is due to the nature of their roles in their respective universes as being progressive female characters and fitting in the superhero roles.

Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman have gone through significant changes in terms of their roles in their universes. This provided an interesting analysis in relation to how they have not only changed in character form, but also in their visual appearances over time. Furthermore, both characters and their stories have gone on to be made into films, *Wonder Woman* (2017), followed by a sequel *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), and *Captain Marvel* (2019) with a sequel to be released in the near future. Both the *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019) films reached box office success and were directed or co-directed by women.

The instruments that were used to collect the data were two separate online sources, as the characters belong to two separate publishers. *GetComics* was used to collect the data for Wonder Woman, and *Marvel Unlimited* was used for Captain Marvel data. This online approach of data collection allowed access to a wider selection of comic books, in the sense that some comic books were difficult to locate in a comic book store or they were highly priced due to them being viewed as collectible pieces.

The comic books collected from online sources required a method to read these comic books, therefore an application called ComicRack was used to collect the data related to Wonder Woman. ComicRack allows the reader to read the online comic books on any device such as a laptop or iPad; in this case it was read on a laptop. The data from Captain Marvel was collected through an application associated with Marvel, *Marvel Unlimited*. This application allows the user to gain access to Marvel comic books and read them through the website or app. This method is discussed further in the data collection process of Captain Marvel.

Both websites allowed the users to filter through the comic books available on each website but in a different manner. The website that the Wonder Woman data was collected from gave the user the option to filter the comic books through both a historical and alphabetical filter. Marvel Unlimited gives the user a wider filter; you could either search for the character by name or by series. The data for this research was collected from both a character and series search. The following portions of the data collection process is broken down into the specific

comic books collected for each character, and the process followed to collect the data from these selected comic books.

4.3. Selection Criteria and Background information on the comics

4.3.1. Wonder Woman

The first portion of data that was collected was related to Wonder Woman. This data was collected from an online comic book website that was not related to the publishing house of DC comic books. This website offered a variety of Wonder Woman comic books throughout the various ages, from special issues to comic book series. The data that was collected included *Wonder Woman: A Celebration of 75 years* (2016), *Wonder Woman: Rise of the Olympian* (2009), *Wonder Woman #1* (2016), and *Wonder Woman #71* (2019).

A crucial piece of data was the special issue, *Wonder Woman: A Celebration of 75 years* (2016). This special issue is divided into four parts and included 18 comic books and special issues of Wonder Woman throughout the ages. While this comic book was published in 2016, it included the first appearance of Wonder Woman and her development throughout the various comic book ages until 2014. The comic books collected from 2014 belong to the New Age (2011 to present) of comic books. This thesis included data collected from the Wonder Woman comic books from 2016 to 2019. The reason for the inclusion of this data was to provide insight into the different ways in which Wonder Woman was portrayed during this time. Furthermore, the data collected from the 2016 special issue of Wonder Woman broke down her character into the various roles that Wonder Woman embodied throughout the years and the comic books associated with her roles. This is discussed further in Chapter 5 in the data analysis of Wonder Woman.

Once the comic books were collected, reading through the comic books was the next step. Reading through the comic books gave insight into the dynamics of the character of Wonder Woman. In terms of her portrayal through the various ages, this was crucial in order to collect the most suitable pieces of data that would provide insight and build the discussion in the literature review and the application of the theories. The collected data included special issues from the Wonder Woman comic books such as *Wonder Woman #0* (2012), which follows the narrative of Wonder Woman as a teenager.

A crucial aspect that needed to be monitored was the inclusion of Wonder Woman throughout the ages, as it was the goals of this thesis to analyse the representation of the characters throughout the ages. The data of Wonder Woman differed drastically from Captain Marvel, as throughout the ages Wonder Woman has remained the same character, i.e. Wonder Woman's identity of Diana Prince has not changed, but her appearance has changed. Captain Marvel, on the other hand, has been portrayed through various characters, each with their own narratives, style and appearance since the introduction of the first Captain Marvel. This provided the thesis with an interesting approach in terms of collecting and analysing the various changes and characters that embodied the title of Captain Marvel, as will be seen in the following chapters.

4.3.2. Captain Marvel

The second portion of data that was collected was the data related to Captain Marvel. The data included the various characters that portrayed Captain Marvel throughout the ages. It is important to note that the data analysed (in chapter 5) discuss the various characters that have portrayed Captain Marvel, however, there is a focus on Carol Danvers' portrayal of Captain Marvel and Ms Marvel. The reason behind this was Carol Danvers was introduced into the Marvel universe as Ms Marvel, a superhero with an identity attached to a male counterpart. While she was not viewed as being the sidekick of Captain Marvel, she had her own narrative. Her identity was linked to the male counterpart until she was asked to take ownership of the title.

The data for Captain Marvel was collected from the Marvel website on a subscription basis; it required a monthly subscription fee in order to gain access to the unlimited sources of comic books related to the Marvel comic book universe. After gaining access to this feature on the Marvel website, the data collecting process began with the first Captain Marvel (1967). The data includes selected comic books from four characters that portrayed Captain Marvel – Marvelli (1967-1979), Monica Rambeau (1989 & 1994), Genis-Vell (1996-2006), and Carol Danvers (2012- present).

The following comic books were collected as data for Captain Marvel: *Marvel Super-heroes #12* (1967), *Captain Marvel #1* (1968), *Captain Marvel #62* (1968), *Captain Marvel #1* (1989), *Captain Marvel #1* (1994), *Captain Marvel #1* (2012), *Captain Marvel #2* (2012), *Captain Marvel #1* (2014), *Captain Marvel #1* (2016), *Captain Marvel # 1* (2019), and *Captain Marvel #1* (2019). In following the development of Carol Danvers, the data needed to include her

tenure as Ms Marvel. These are the following: *Ms Marvel #1* (1977), *Ms Marvel #1* (1978), *Ms Marvel #20* (1978), *Ms Marvel #1* (2006), and *Ms Marvel #25* (2006).

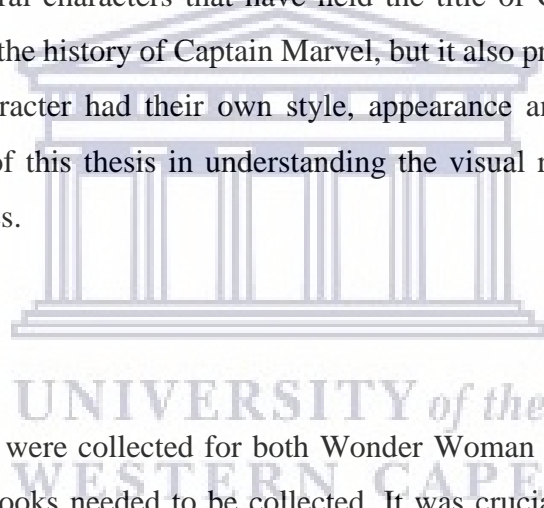
As stated previously, this research focuses on the portrayal of Carol Danvers throughout the ages, therefore the inclusion of the data collected from Ms Marvel is crucial. This gave insight into how Carol was portrayed before assuming the role of Captain Marvel, thus this data needed to be collected from her role as Ms Marvel. Furthermore, the additional data was collected from comic books outside of the Captain Marvel and Ms Marvel series. This additional data includes the comic books, *Amazing Spider Man #16* (1982), and *Avengers Unplugged #5* (1996). The reason for the inclusion of these comic books in the data collection was due to the first appearance of Monica Rambeau as Captain Marvel in *Amazing Spider Man #16*, and Genis-Vell in *Avengers Unplugged #5*.

The inclusion of the several characters that have held the title of Captain Marvel not only provided background into the history of Captain Marvel, but it also provided an opportunity to understand how each character had their own style, appearance and narrative, along with following the objectives of this thesis in understanding the visual representation of women throughout the various ages.

4.4. Data Analysis

After all the comic books were collected for both Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, the data within these comic books needed to be collected. It was crucial that the data collected would be able to provide a detailed analysis in the following chapters. The data collected from these comic books were broken down into categories relating to the various theories discussed in the theoretical framework. As previously mentioned, the objective of this thesis was to understand how the visual representation of women in comic books has changed over time. The data in this respect needed to be from each comic book era, therefore, one image was collected from each era for both characters from their creation until 2019.

By examining a recurring theme in the data, and through the theoretical approach interpreting the data, this thesis followed a thematic analysis to examine the data. Braun and Clarke (2012:57) describe a thematic analysis as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across the data set”. A thematic analysis relates to the notion that Merriam (2002) discussed regarding the aspect of qualitative research



that seeks to identify a recurring theme or pattern in the data. The goal and objective of this thesis was to examine the recurring theme of sexualization of women and the development of modes that contribute to this representation of women.

A thematic analysis is an adaptable approach that allows the analyst to focus on the data in various ways (Braun and Clarke, 2012). As the theoretical framework of this thesis includes several different approaches for analysing and interpreting the data, a thematic approach is best suited to this thesis' subject matter. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2012) point out that through a thematic approach a researcher is able to account for the obvious or semantic meaning that the data holds. Additionally, research may question the latent meanings, the beliefs, and notions that are not explicit. Following this approach gave the thesis the scope to examine the crucial elements and recurring aspects that are prominent in the representation of women in comic books.

The data contained not only multimodal elements, but textual and content elements as well that needed to be analysed in relation to the thesis questions and objectives. The structure of comic books is pictorial and textual, both of these concepts are modes with the inclusion of several other modes such as gesture, costume, colour and gaze. Furthermore, the inclusion of these other modes in the data could not be excluded because these modes work together to deliver a larger visual. These modes, as a collective, contribute to one communicative objective, which is delivering a narrative to the reader through a visual display. Kress (2012), cited in Yang (2016), mentioned that modes are arranged as a single domain, and together they are viewed as a single related cultural resource that allows meaning to be made by individuals in society at a certain time.

The images were analysed through a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). The modes that contribute to the visual construction of these characters and how these characters developed over time were analysed. These modes act as an outward expression of the characters' identities, because these modes contribute to the overall perception of the characters. Therefore, the application of this theory is to elaborate on and examine the modes that contribute to this notion and standard which are presented in Marvel and DC comic books.

As previously mentioned, the modes employed in comic books are chosen for a specific purpose in order for the reader to make meaning. In relation to the textual component, the theories of intertextuality and dialogicality were applied, in order to understand the crucial role text plays in comic books to drive the conversation between the reader and characters, and

character and character, along with narration. Beyond the textual component that was discussed and analysed, image was presented as an intertextual component, according to Barthes' (1977, cited Wang, 2014) notion on how images can be presented as intertextual properties.

In the previous chapter, Marvel's figure 6 was shown to have intertextual properties. A further analysis was conducted on the data collected to present aspects within the comic books that are intertextual or have intertextual properties. Dialogicality gives insight into how voice has a significant role in directing the reader, but also gives shape to the character's identity. Some characters have accents and a manner of speaking, which provides more information on the characters' backstories about their origins or current location.

Queer Theory addressed the heteronormative representation of characters in comic books and how the characters, Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, are included in this form of representation. Furthermore, the discussion around queer theory addressed how the characters challenge the heteronormative ideals and how the editorial/creative teams have done this through the characters. The collected data provided insight into how comic books navigate through the hetero-norm, in relation to how the characters are represented in a sexualized manner, yet their characteristics differ, and they are regarded as progressive female characters.

In relation to intersectionality, the data presented an interesting perspective, as indicated in the previous portion of this chapter. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are complex characters in the sense that they each have their own identities that have been developed overtime, Captain Marvel having several identities. The data collected from the selected Captain Marvel comics showed that each character had their own intersectional aspects that defined them. The purpose of an intersectional analysis was to gain insight into how these characters were represented alongside their visual representation. The data showed some similarities between the characters Diana Prince (Wonder Woman) and Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel) with the inclusion of Monica Rambeau.

To interpret the data, this thesis used several theoretical approaches to analyse the data. These theoretical approaches were used to establish a conclusion on the visual representation of women in comic books. A crucial aspect that needed to be addressed was how this data could provide an accurate account of the various functions of the modes that contribute to the representation of the characters.

4.5. Conclusion

The methodology elaborated on the data collecting process that was followed in relation to both the characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. The data collected from the selected comic books gave insight into the individual character's representation over a period of time, as cited in the objectives and question portion of this thesis. The methodology presented and broke down the method in which this data was analysed through the theoretical framework. The following chapters, 5, 6 and 7, elaborate on the theoretical application, with chapter 5 focusing on the multimodal discussion, chapter 6 the intertextual and dialogical analysis, and chapter 7 presenting the queer theory and intersectional discussion.



Chapter 5: Female masculinity representations of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel

5.1. Introduction

The data collected for this thesis was taken from selected comic books from both Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. Captain Marvel's data includes selected comic books from Carol Danvers' period as Ms Marvel. It is important to point out that this thesis has made attempts to contact both Marvel and DC comics regarding the use of their characters in relation to copyright permission; since writing this thesis, there has been no contact from both Marvel and DC publishing houses.

As mentioned previously in the Multimodality and Gender Identity section in the literature review, there are several modes that this study focuses on such as colour, image, text, gaze, gesture and dress (costumes). The modes colour, image and text are the driving forces behind delivering the overall results of a comic book. Some comics may not employ colour, as in the case of some Japanese manga. Image and text are significant modes that contribute to the larger understanding and ethos of the comic book genre in that these modes shape the narrative of what is to be understood by the intended audience. Therefore, these two modes are intertwined with each other; as a collective, they contribute to the shaping of the comic book genre.

While some comics incorporate both text and images, others employ a different approach to deliver their narrative. Cohn (2005:1) discusses the use of text and images in "Silent comics such as Kid Koala's Nufonia Must fall contain no words at all. Whereas works such as Dave Sim's Reads volumes of Cerebus have been dominated by text, relegating the images to illustrative roles". Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman both employ a different strategy as it incorporates a balance between image and text, including complex narrative structures and relationships between characters. Therefore, text plays a vital role in delivering the story to the reader. The addition of text appears in the form of monologues, dialogues and narration.

A mode that is expressed through text in comic books is sound Cohn (2005). Comic book creators have found a unique and creative means to express sound through text in comic books. An example of a sound effect would be *SHOOM!*, which represents the sound effects of a spacecraft at full speed. These sound effects provide more detail to the story as creators place emphasis on the movement that is taking place. In this sense, text plays a vital role and

contributes in more than one form. Text further shapes the world in which we find these characters and their interaction with devices they encounter.

Most comic books have been printed in colour since their creation, while other comic books may be printed in black and white for a novel and aesthetic effect, for example, manga is printed in black and white. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel have been printed in colour since their creation in 1941 and 1968 respectively. As time progressed, more advancements have been made in creating comic books. Both characters have gone through dramatic changes since their creation. The data collected showcase these changes in how women are represented in comic books.

5.2. Wonder Woman

Wonder Woman was created in 1941 by psychologist William Moulton Marston and made her first appearance in *All Star Comics issue #8*. Since her creation, Wonder Woman has become a key figure in the DC comic book universe alongside her male counterparts, Superman and Batman. In celebration of her 75 years, DC comic books released a special edition of Wonder Woman that showcased her various roles throughout the decades, *The Amazon* (1942-1948), *The Princess* (1958-1982), *The Ambassador* (1987-2008), and *The Warrior* (2014-2014). The dates explore Wonder Woman's evolution as a character and the various roles she has taken on throughout her extensive history.

Figure 7 below showcases the evolution of Wonder Woman, from her first appearance in 1941 to her appearance in 2019. Wonder Woman has gone through several changes in appearance, but the colours that are associated with her costume have remained consistent, red, blue, gold and white stars, except in 2019. The symbolism behind these colours are that they represent the United States of America's flag, the land she has sworn to protect. This is interesting given that Wonder Woman is neither American nor from Earth, her story is like that of Greek mythology. Wonder Woman is from the island Themyscira, an island that is invisible and inhabited by the Amazonians, the world's strongest race of women. Made from clay and given the abilities of the Greek Gods, Diana was born and would later become Wonder Woman.

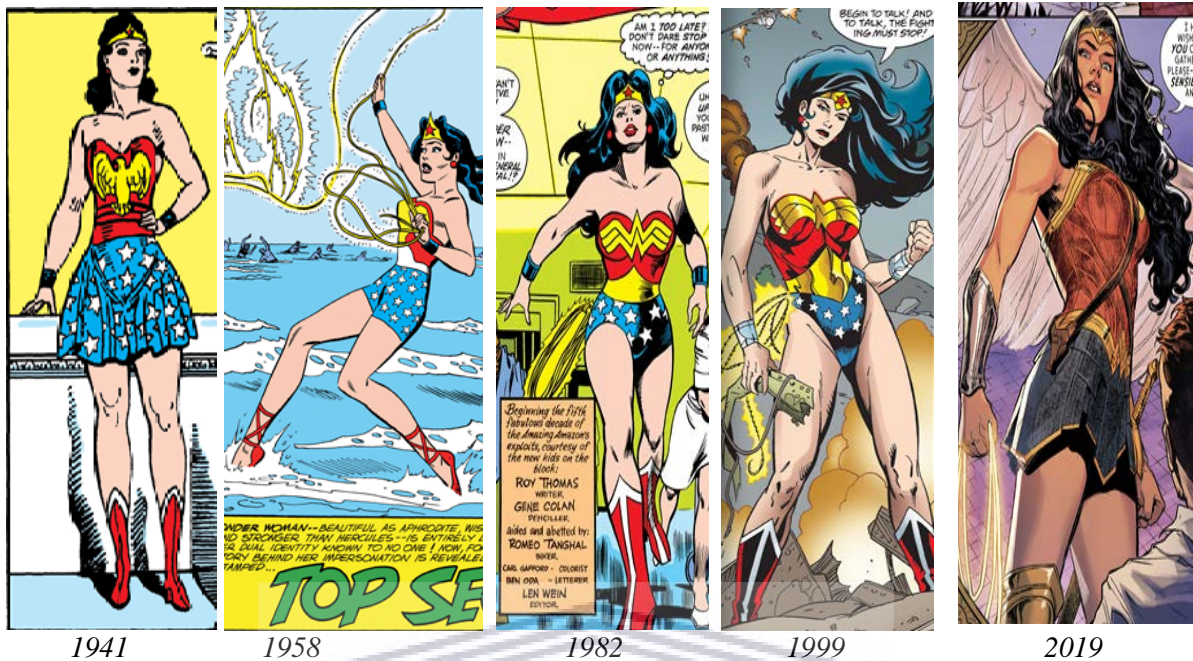


Figure 7.

Wonder Woman's backstory may be from mythology, but her purpose in both the fantasy world comic book and the real world was to play a key role in World War II. Many scholars have discussed the notion of how Wonder Woman was used as propaganda in World War II. Turberville (2016:71) states that "In the 1940's, during World War II, Wonder Woman's character encouraged women to join the war effort by both physically getting involved and economically supporting the troops and their own families through the labour forces". Her role has been compared to Rosie the Riveter in boosting the support and encouraged women to contribute to the war efforts.

Despite being used as a propaganda instrument during World War II, Wonder Woman was viewed as being a feminist icon in the women's movement and this encouraged women to play an active role during this period. However, she is often represented as being submissive and hypersexualized, as have many other female characters. Although she appears to be masculine, her masculinity is overshadowed by her hypersexualization. While comics are fantasy, they present an unrealistic standard of how women should be represented. This hypersexualization takes place in the modes of gaze, gesture/positioning and costume as they contribute to an overall image that is created, an image that caters to the male audience.

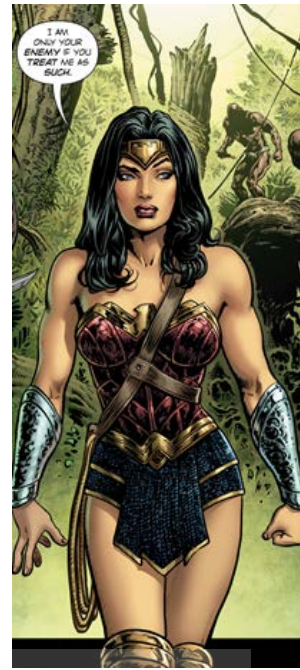
Gaze, a notion that has been mentioned by various scholars in the literature review of this thesis, is the overall portrayal and representation of women in comic books. McCaughey's (1997) discussion of a woman's body being vulnerable and usable stood out in that chapter. Building on this notion of how female characters are represented in comic books in relation to gaze, scholars have noted that this is to satisfy the male reader. DC's figure 8 below showcases two different types of Wonder Woman: the image on the right is a teenage Wonder Woman (2012), and the image on the left is an adult Wonder Woman (2016). This figure provides an understanding into the domain of comic book audiences in the sense that the teenage Wonder Woman is dressed more conservatively and is not sexualized because of her age, but this could also relate to the target audience that the author is trying to reach, which would be young teenage girls.

DC's figure 8 showcases two different types of interpretations of Wonder Woman, each with a different target audience in mind; this resulted in two different gazes being created. The image on the left is taken from "The Lair of the Minotaur", a story which follows a teenage version of Wonder Woman, while the image on the right shows a more mature Wonder Woman. This is taken from the *DC Universe Rebirth* in 2016 and showcases Wonder Woman in a more mature dress. While there is a clear distinguishing aspect between the two target audiences, the mode gaze on the image on the right is often the normative route that is followed when portraying an adult Wonder Woman.

The modes in DC's figure 8 show the different application of modes in comic books. Examining the mode, costume, one can observe how the image on the left, taken from *Wonder Woman #0*, is applied differently due to the age of Wonder Woman. Compared to the image on the right, taken from *Wonder Woman #1*, the mode costume is more sexualized. Wonder Woman becomes sexualized with age as the intended audience that read this comic book would be young adults and adults, more specifically, as discussed, comic book readers are predominantly male with a small percentage being women.



Wonder Woman #0 (2012)



Wonder Woman #1 (2016)

Figure 8.

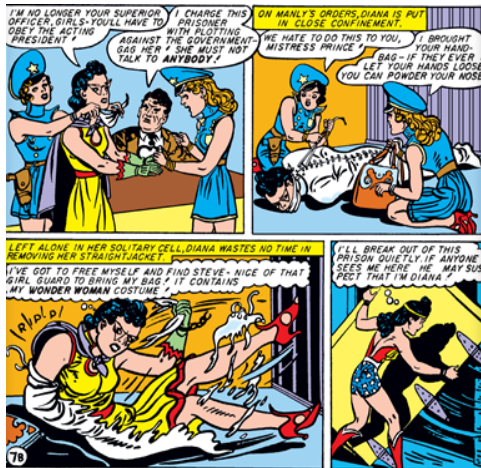
Kristen McLean from NPD Book scan conducted a survey on 72,000 people in 2017. The results were that 63% of consumers of comic books and graphic novels were male, while 37% were women. As mentioned previously, the comic book industry is predominantly male in terms of writers and audience, therefore the gaze is to cater to the majority male audience. However, there has been an increase of women in both the audience and comic book writing. The question is, what will happen if comic book creators deviate from this sexualised portrayal of women that has become the norm in the comic book industry?

Tim Hanley conducted a survey of the DC and Marvel editorial teams between July and December 2018 (Beat Staff, 2019). DC comics published 391 new comic books during this time frame. The overall number of creators was 3476, of these 2877 were male, 597 female, and two were non-binary. Furthermore, Hanley broke down the roles of these 3476 creators into various categories such as covers, writers, pencils, inks, colours, letters, editor and assistant editors. The overall percentage of female creators who were credited in DC comic books during this time were 17.2%, however, if a female creator released several books in a month, she was counted by the number of books she published or was credited in. In the other categories mentioned, women represented 13.3% of writers, pencils 7.7%, letters 6.4% (the lowest), and

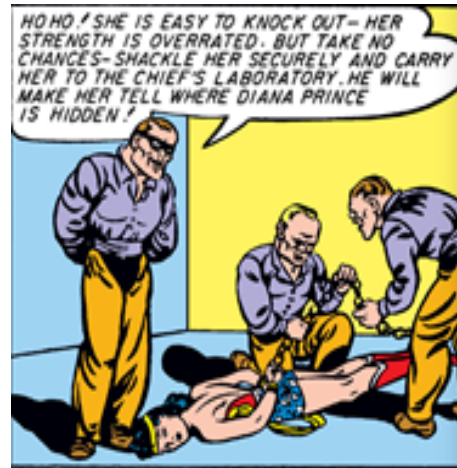
in assistant editor, women represented 46.7% (the highest). In the category of editor, women represented 38.5% while men represented with 61.5%.

While this study was conducted over a period of six months, the result could be lower if one were to exclude the number of times a female creator was credited and include the general overall number of female creators in the publishing house. These numbers are important to take into consideration in analysing modes, because when creators create comic books, it is from a male perspective, as several scholars such as Robbins (2002), Roblou (2012) and Natale (2013) have discussed the dominant male gaze. Analysing the overall mode of gaze contributes to the overall image of Wonder Woman being sexualized in comic books, which includes the outcome of other modes such as gestures and dress.

In terms of gesture/positioning, in the early years of Wonder Woman, she was portrayed in various positions, notably in some form of bondage. Throughout *Wonder Woman #28 Villainy Incorporated* (1948), and *Wonder Woman - A celebration of 75 years* (2016), in the Amazon chapter (1942-1957), Wonder Woman appears bound in several instances, either by shackles or her own lasso of truth, and in one instance, she is referred to as a “captive”. DC comic’s figure 9 below provides some instances of Wonder Woman being held captive, despite coming from an island of the strongest warriors on earth, having abilities associated with Greek Gods, and being a feminist icon. Wonder Woman’s strength can be viewed as being much more superior to that of her male counterparts, i.e. Batman, and can match that of Superman. However, her portrayal is unlike her male counterparts in challenging the notion of masculinity; the portrayal of Wonder Woman as being masculine is sexualized through her bondage. Portraying Wonder Woman as submissive therefore distracts from her being portrayed as masculine and can be linked back to the male gaze that overshadows her masculinity. This is done through the various positions she is drawn in and her overtly sexualized costume.



Wonder Woman #7 (1943)



Wonder Woman #28 (1948)

Figure 9.

Mitra Emad's book, *Reading Wonder Woman's Body* (2006), discusses this portrayal of Wonder Woman: "Whenever feminine nationhood threatens to become overly masculine, the images of Wonder Woman become increasingly sexualized and her body becomes subject to bondage" (Emad, 2006:982). By portraying Wonder Woman in a submissive manner further emphasizes how women are portrayed in comic books as being vulnerable and that their bodies are usable. This can be seen in the broken-back phenomena in which the female characters are positioned and drawn in such a manner that their breasts and rear are emphasized (figure 10 below).



The Bearing of the Soul (1999)

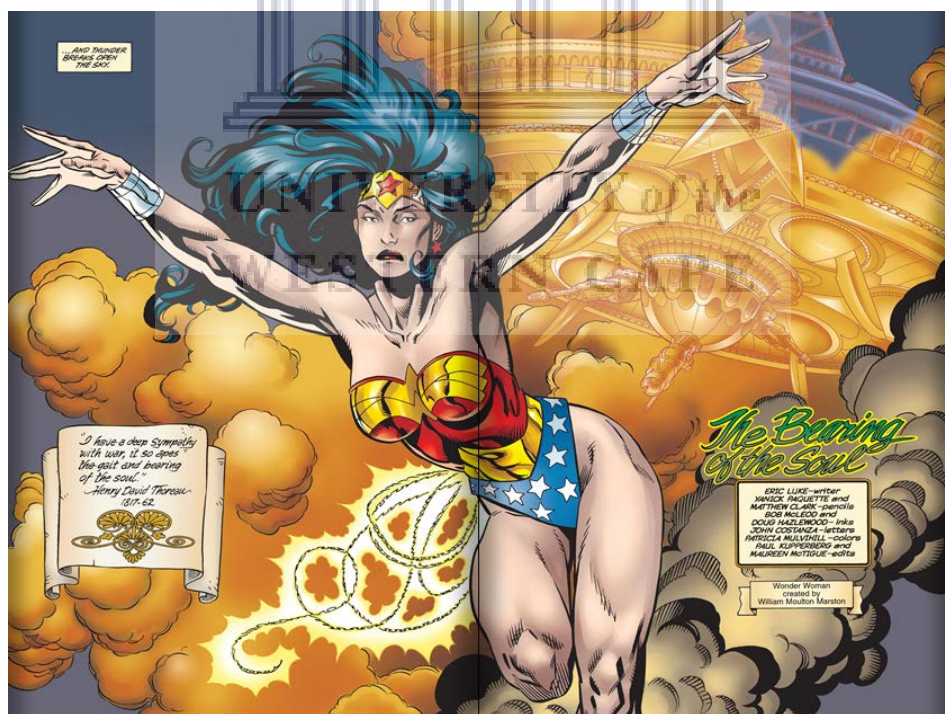


Rescue Angel (2014)

Figure 10.

DC comics figure 10 demonstrates the broken-back notion that Cocca (2014) discussed. These two images were taken from two different time frames. The image on the left was taken from *Wonder Woman The Bearing of The Soul* (1999), and the image on the right was taken from *Rescue Angel* (2014). In both issues, Wonder Woman is shown in combat assisting soldiers and trying to bring peace in these war zones. In *The Bearing of The Soul* (1999), Wonder Woman is shown lifting a tank and being hit by rockets, but she survives by showcasing her strength and abilities. In both instances, Wonder Woman appears to have an arched back that emphasizes her breasts and rear further. In both images her costume is skintight, allowing her curves and a portion of her breast to be exposed.

While these two images provide insight into the broken-back characteristic in female comic book characters, *The Bearing of The Soul* features a much larger image of Wonder Woman with an arched back. In DC's figure 11 (below) Wonder Woman is drawn and positioned in a similar centrefold style found in men's magazines. By drawing her in this manner feeds into the male audience's gaze in that again her breasts are in full view and she is positioned in a style that is unlike her male counterparts.



Wonder Woman *The Bearing of The Soul* #142 (1999)
Figure 11.

Wonder Woman's costume has changed over time, with each era having numerous versions of her iconic costume, and some of her costume changes have taken place within the same era. Each creator that has worked on Wonder Woman comic books has left their mark on how they wanted to portray Wonder Woman, each with their own interpretations of her costume and how it should appear. The colour scheme has remained the same throughout the ages; however, the stars are no longer featured on her skirt in newer editions. As a mode, dress is an outward representation of who the character is as the mode is attached to their superhero identity, embodying their abilities, persona, and in some cases, it is their only identity.

Wonder Woman is represented as a superhero, yet her costume appears to feature similar elements to that of Catwoman's suit, in terms of being skintight. When analysing Wonder Woman's costume over the various eras, such as in the early eighties to present day, one cannot escape the male gaze that is a dominant trait in Wonder Woman comic books. An interesting approach to Wonder Woman's costume appears in *Wonder Woman: Rise of the Olympian* (2009) (DC comics figure 12). This costume embodies a whole new element in terms of the outward representation of Wonder Woman, and exemplifies historic patriotism found in early editions of Wonder Woman.



Figure 12.

This mode gives Wonder Woman a masculine appearance, unlike in the other figures in which the mode of dress is used to sexualize her. Instead, this mode in figure 12 sheds a familiar light on the role of Wonder Woman, the role of the warrior princess. Her posture is like that of her male counterparts who are drawn standing firm, her back is not arched so that her breasts and rear can draw the reader's attention. This is an empowering image of Wonder Woman, an image that resonates with all the characteristics of Wonder Woman – brave, noble, and a protector. These characteristics have always been present throughout her portrayal, but it is overshadowed by the creation of a sexual fantasy.

In DC's figure 12, the audience sees a different perspective of Wonder Woman and this is done through the dress mode employed in these comic books, which tend to represent women's costumes as being sensual rather than functional. Wonder Woman's costume is made from armour, yet the breastplate in DC's figures 10 and 11 forms perfectly around her breasts, almost hugging or squeezing compared to DC's figure 12. In DC comics figure 7, when observing the various images of Wonder Woman, each image showcases the advancements in Wonder Woman's costume, from the modest skirt in 1941, to the tight 80s-style spandex, to the final image in 2019 that resembles the costume Gal Gadot wore in the Wonder Woman films. The image on the left in DC's figure 8 represents a teenage Wonder Woman wearing a costume that resembles the 1941 costume and the innocence of her youth set to inspire young girls and boys.

The variations of her costume create several interpretations of Wonder Woman, each representing the individual era's trends and style. Each interpretation of her costume follows a similar colour scheme and theme, which contributes to the overall image of Wonder Woman. These figures showcase how the employment of the various modes create a sexualized image of a beloved character that offers much more than her body. Modes are vital to comic books as they create the world in which the narrative unfolds, but modes also contribute to how women and men are represented differently in comic books.

Wonder Woman has evolved over time in her appearance due to the advancement in storytelling and illustrations. The current representation of Wonder Woman has significantly changed from her first appearance. However, themes of bondage and sexualization are still found in her comic books. All these modes contribute to the representation of Wonder Woman; each mode can be traced back to the gaze of the specific audience the comic book is targeting. Wonder Woman is represented as having masculine qualities yet her body, through the modes, has become her greatest weakness as it confines her to the heteronormative domain that has

become a theme in comic books. Queer Theory provides an in-depth approach to analyse the relative notion of the heteronormative domain and how Wonder Woman is included in the discussion of the heteronormative domain.

5.3. Captain Marvel

The second portion of data collected was taken from Captain Marvel (Marvel Comics). Unlike Wonder Woman who remained the same character, Diana Prince, Captain Marvel has gone through several changes in characters that have taken on the iconic name. Wonder Woman has been a continuation of the same character from the Golden Age of comic books and has been discussed in various research studies; Captain Marvel, however, was introduced in the Silver Age of comic books and includes a more diverse character. Captain Marvel is a title that has been passed down from character to character, thus each Captain Marvel has their own unique narrative and modes that contribute to their overall image. It is crucial to point out that the background information gathered regarding the various characters has not been verified by the Marvel staff on their official website.

The first appearance of Captain Marvel was in 1967. The character that took on this name was Mar-vell, a male Kree from the Kree Empire whose name Mar-vell was thought to be Marvel and his rank was Captain which resulted in the people of Earth naming him Captain Marvel. It was not until the following year, 1968, that Mar-vell made his premiere in *Captain Marvel #1* (1968), thus spanned an eleven-year narrative of Mar-vell as Captain Marvel from 1968-1979. Mar-vell would die of cancer in the 1982 graphic novel *The Death of Captain Marvel*, however, the name of Captain Marvel would live on in the form of a new character. Monica Rambeau, who first appeared in *Amazing Spider Man #16* (1982), was a Harbour Officer who assisted her grandfather's friend Professor Andre LeClare to uncover a source of unknown energy used by an evil dictator. LeClare refers to her as *Mon Capitaine* which translates to 'My Captain', despite Monica only being a lieutenant. As the story progresses, Monica tries to stop the unknown devices of cosmic energy from destroying Fort Benning and in the process acquires her powers.

The name *Marvel* comes from a soldier who was present when Monica saved Professor LeClare and the oil rig from an explosion of cosmic devices. The soldier exclaimed "Captain est Maravilla" after hearing LeClare refer to Monica as *mon capitaine*. The following day the story was in the newspaper with the headline *Who is Captain Marvel*. After her first appearance,

Monica Rambeau appeared in various other issues, but it was not until 1989 that she appeared in her solo issue *Captain Marvel #1* (1989) and has continued to appear in various other comic book issues, including appearing with the new Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers. Monica goes through several aliases, but she was the first woman to have the title of Captain Marvel.

After Monica's role as Captain Marvel, the title was passed on to Mar-vell's son Genis-vell who first appeared in *Avengers Unplugged #5* (1996). Genis-vell was Captain Marvel from 1996 to 2004 until his sister Phyla-Vell challenged him to the title of their father, thus casting the title in a sort of sibling limbo of who should carry the title of Captain Marvel. Phyla-Vell often appears as a secondary character in Genis-vell's narratives and this is affirmed by the introduction of every issue published during this time: "He is Genis, son of the legendary intergalactic hero Mar-vell". In 2008, Mar-vell was brought to the future (present day) before his death and his story continues. In 2012, Ms Marvel, Carol Danvers, assumed the role and title of Captain Marvel after being encouraged to take on the title by Captain America, remaining Captain Marvel until this study was conducted.



Figure 13.

Unlike DC comics' Wonder Woman, Marvel comic books have complex narratives regarding the character of Captain Marvel. Each Captain Marvel embodies a different image and modes;

however, it is Carol Danvers in her role as Captain Marvel that is the focus of this thesis. It is important to discuss the first three Captain Marvels as this provides further context into the extensive history of the title. Captain Marvel first appeared in the Silver Age, followed by three various representations in the Modern Age and back to one in the New Age. Marvel's figure 13 (above) shows each Captain Marvel in the order of their first appearance: Mar-vell (1967), Monica Rambeau (1982), and Genis-Vell (1995).

The character Carol Danvers was first introduced in *Captain Marvel #1* (1968) during the Silver Age of comic books. Carol was introduced as a Security Chief at Cape Kennedy, and was featured in *Captain Marvel* issues 1 to 18. However, it would be years before Carol took on the title of Captain Marvel, after an accident merged Carol Danvers' DNA and that of Mar-vell, she gained similar abilities to Mar-vell's, thus becoming Ms Marvel. Ms Marvel first appeared in 1977 in her debut issue, *Ms Marvel #1*. Carol Danvers would assume the role of Ms Marvel and appear in her solo issues from 1977 to 1979 and 2006 to 2010. She also appeared in various other comic books, namely the Avengers. Marvel's figures 14 to 16 below shows Carol's evolution in the Marvel universe, from the various changes to Ms Marvel to her as present-day Captain Marvel, from the Bronze Age to the New Age.



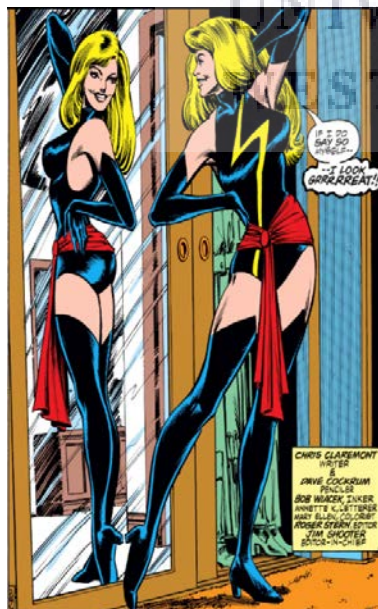
Ms Marvel #1 (1977)

Ms Marvel #9 (1977)

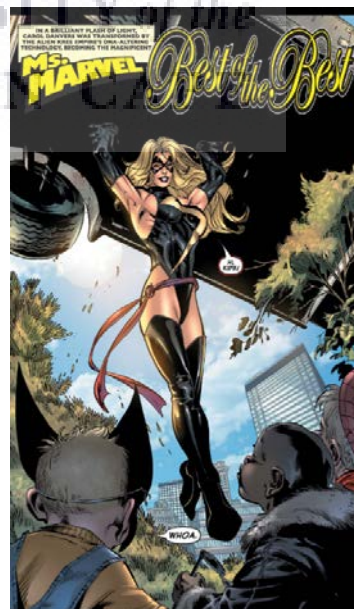
Figure 14.

The images in Marvel's figure 14 were taken from the first series of Ms Marvel comics from 1977 to 1979 during the Bronze Age. The image on the left was the first appearance in her debut issue, and the image on the right shows the change in her costume as a new creative team took over.

Marvel's figure 14 bares a similar resemblance to Captain Marvel's (Mar-vell) costume in the sense that the colour scheme used in later issues of Captain Marvel / Mar-vell appears in the same colours red, black and the star emblazoned on the chest. In these earlier issues (1 to 20), Ms Marvel's costumes went through various changes: in issues 1 to 9, her stomach and back are exposed; and in issues 9 to 20 her costume covers her stomach and back. One can view this as a new creative team taking over and having creative differences. In 1978, Ms Marvel appears in a new costume with no resemblance to her former costume, breaking away from Captain Marvel's identity and establishing her own sense of identity and style, opting for a sleek black outfit with a lightning bolt running over the star of the Kree empire. In Marvel's figure 15, the image on the left belongs to the same time frame and was introduced in 1978, issue #20, and remained Ms Marvel's costume in the new series in 2006 to 2010, issue #50, during the New Age, as seen in the image on the right. Similar to the different interpretations of Wonder Woman, each creative team has their own approach in how they want to portray their character.



Ms Marvel #20 (1978)



Ms Marvel #1 (2006)

Figure 15.

Marvel's figure 16 is the first appearance of Carol Danvers in *Captain Marvel #1* in 2012. The image on the left refers to the previous role of Carol Danvers as Ms Marvel. This image on the left is intended to inform the reader about the new Captain Marvel, while the image on the right was taken from *Captain Marvel #1* (2012). The new Captain Marvel differs from the other Captain Marvels in that, unlike her predecessors, Carol Danvers does not hide her identity and has fully embraced her new role as Captain Marvel, as seen in the speech bubble in the image on the right in which she states, "I'm taking the damn name". This is in reference to her being persuaded by Steve Rogers (Captain America) to assume the role as the new Captain Marvel.

The modes in each figure contribute to a different stage in the evolution of Carol Danvers, from the extension identity of Mar-vel as Captain Marvel, to taking on her own approach to her role as Ms Marvel through her new costume, and finally embracing her new role as Captain Marvel. When Carol Danvers took on the role of Captain Marvel, the title of Ms Marvel fell to Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American Muslim teenager. In terms of the modes that contribute to the overall image of Carol Danvers in both her roles as Ms Marvel and Captain Marvel, there are similarities that are associated with Wonder Woman. It has been established and mentioned that the creators and audience of comic books are predominantly male. The same survey included in the Wonder Woman data conducted by Tim Hanley was done during the same time frame on Marvel comics.



Captain Marvel #1 (2012)

Figure 16.

The following results were found in the survey: the total number of creators was 4781 of which 4002 were men, 777 were female, and two were non-binary. In terms of credits, 16.3 % were female and 83.7% were male. Breaking these numbers down into the various categories that women occupy: 16.2 % were writers, 5.8 % pencils, 0.0% letters (the lowest), 14.3% editors and 69.7 % assistant editors (highest). These figures provide an understanding of the creative teams that are responsible for the comic books that were published between July and December 2018 at Marvel comic books.

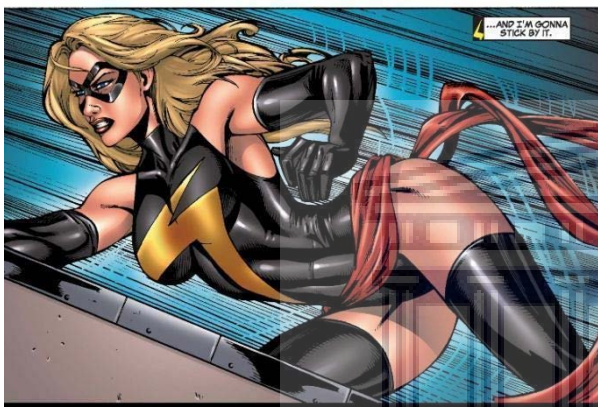
From this data collected, we have a sample of the various roles women play in comic books. In terms of contributing to the narrative, women had a small contribution during the early series of Ms Marvel (1977-1978), and have featured little since then as well (2006-2010). However, this changed in 2019 when the first issue of Captain Marvel featured a predominantly female creative team that included a woman writer and editor. Since Carol Danvers became Captain Marvel more women have featured on creative teams. In 2012 to 2013, and 2014 to 2015, the Captain Marvel series was led by writer Kelly Sue DeConnick. The mode gaze, however, remains a male-centred driven subject.

In the early years of Ms Marvel (1977-1979), the creative teams portrayed Ms Marvel as a woman who fought back, which was indicated on the front cover of the debut issue: “*At last a bold new super-heroine*”, “*This Woman, This Warrior*”, and “*This female fights back*”. These statements are used to describe Ms Marvel and establish her as a new type of superhero, one that fights back. This is similar to the approach that DC took when they created Wonder Woman, by comparing her abilities to that of the Greek Gods. The representation of Ms Marvel during this time frame in relation to the male gaze is subtle in the sense that Ms Marvel is not overtly sexualized. Ms Marvel does not appear in forms of bondage besides when she is caught in the tentacles of a giant octopus. The theme of bondage is not a recurring theme in this series of Ms Marvel as seen in the data, as opposed to Wonder Woman who is placed in bondage by her enemies.

The following series of Ms Marvel (2006-2010) was created by a new creative team, 27 years later. The new series resumes with Carol Danvers in the role of Ms Marvel and wearing the same costume as in the previous series. However, unlike the previous series, the male gaze has become more apparent in that Carol’s costume has more definition and appears tighter than in the previous series. This can be attributed to the progress that has been made in the comic book

industry and how characters are drawn. The previous Marvel figure 16 showed Carol's evolution in the Marvel universe from Ms Marvel to Captain Marvel, a change that brought a new role and dimension in how to represent this change.

The data collected in Marvel's figure 17 was taken from both a Ms Marvel issue and a Captain Marvel issue. This data relates to the broken-back lens that female characters are drawn through. This data elaborates further that the broken-back element is inclusive in both DC and Marvel comic books.



Ms Marvel #25 (2006)

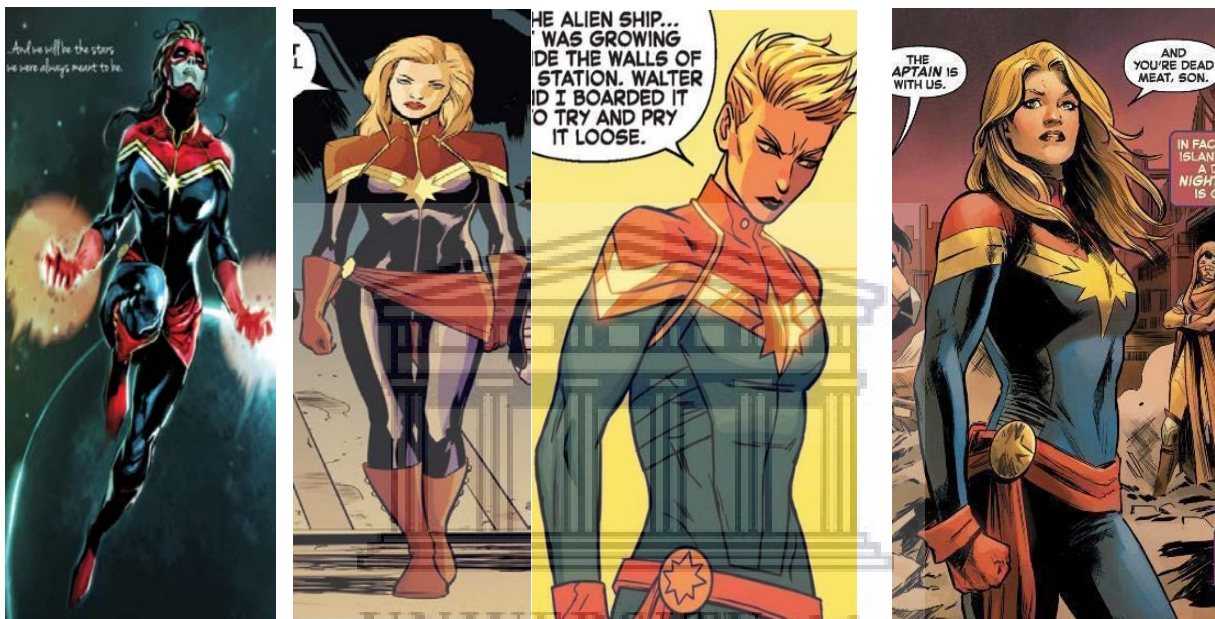


Captain Marvel #1 (2012)

Figure 17.

In both images, Ms Marvel and Captain Marvel are engaged in battle, therefore a lot of movement is taking place as this is an action sequence. In both images, Ms Marvel's and Captain Marvel's backs are arched in a manner that showcases their breasts and backsides, with the image on the left being a side panel and the image on the right drawn from behind Captain Marvel. In positioning the characters in this manner draws the reader's attention to the most prominent features and in these instances, it would be the breasts and backside. This is a notion that Scott (2015) discussed that, when in action, female bodies are represented differently than that of a male character. While the broken back may not be a running theme in both these series, it is present, referring to the notion that a woman's body is usable and able. The purpose of the broken back is to position female characters in unrealistic positions that showcase their bodies and draw focus to their breasts and rear, an aspect that is only applied to female characters in both DC and Marvel comic books.

The data collected in Marvel's figure 18 spans across the various series of Carol as Captain Marvel. These series are as follows: 2012–2013; 2014–2015; 2016–2017; 2019 to present. The data collected in Marvel's figure 18 belongs to the same comic book age, the New Age. The data further shows the different approaches that each creative team had in shaping their own image of how they wanted Captain Marvel to be represented.



2012-2013

2014-2015

2016-2017

2019-present

Figure 18.

Each image in Marvel's figure 18 has their own unique aspect about Captain Marvel as the mode of colour and costume remains the same, with cloth tied around Captain Marvel's waist, referring to the style that she wore when she was Ms Marvel. Carol's costume draws on the previous versions of her own Ms Marvel and Captain Marvel costumes; an important feature is the star on her chest, which is the symbol of the Kree Empire and has been drawn on all the previous Captain Marvels' costumes. As previously discussed as a mode, a superhero's costume is more than just something that is worn, it is an extension and outward representation of their identity or persona. Carol's transition from Ms Marvel to Captain Marvel shows a level of maturity; through the mode of dress, Carol has gained a new sense of identity as Captain Marvel.

This mode was applied differently when Carol was Ms Marvel, as seen in 1978 when Ms Marvel appeared in a new costume, as seen in Marvel's figure 15. Creators drew Carol in a new costume that was different from how she was represented in previous issues. In doing this, the creator almost gave her a new identity, different from the traditional Captain Marvel theme. However, her identity was not fully her own as she kept her superhero identity as Ms Marvel and Carol would go through several name changes throughout her history in the Marvel universe, each with their own costume. The mode of dress/costume has a significant effect on the characters as it is a crucial component of their identity both as a superhero and as a person.

The data collected allows insight into the development of Carol as a character through several modes, but the mode of dress is the first mode that the readers recognize. As previously stated, it becomes an outward representation of the character and symbolically associated with the character, i.e. who would Superman be without his iconic "S" on his chest? In the case of Carol, she makes reference to her past role as Ms Marvel through the scarf around her waist that appeared in her first appearance as Ms Marvel where it was tied around her neck. It is also apparent that this mode can be used to sexualize the character; Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers), along with other female characters, fall into this category. This mode is applied in situations in which the character is shown performing an action, such as lifting a car to save civilians or in action/battle.

Comic books encompass several modes with each having a crucial role in contributing to the overall theme, narrative and character. The application of modes differs with each editorial team, in that the mode dress/costume may change with a new editorial team. However, a constant element that these modes are applied to is the sexualisation of these female characters when performing actions and is utilized through the mode of gesture/positioning. Through this mode, female characters are positioned in a manner that their breasts and backsides are more prominent to the audience, and further contribute to the notion of the broken back that has become a significant aspect in drawing female characters.

5.4. Conclusion

Comic books are multimodal instruments as several modes contribute to the communication of the narrative to the reader. Several modes, such as colour, gaze, gesture/positioning and costume contribute to deliver the final image. In relation to the literature done by Robbins (2002), Cocca (2014), and Scott (2015), it becomes evident that the notions that these scholars

discussed are present in the data analysed in this chapter. Robbins (2002) addressed that women are represented with unrealistic bodily features such as overly sized breasts and backsides.

Cocca's (2014) notion of the broken back is present in the images discussed in Marvel's figures 10 and 17. Scott (2015) and Natale (2013) mentioned that female characters in comic books were represented through the male gaze, which became apparent through the analysis of the data in this chapter. The modes have a fundamental role in the development of comic books, as it shapes not only the narrative but the larger image of representation of the characters. By engaging with the data, it became evident that, through the modes, the characters have developed within each age. If one compares the first appearance of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel to the 2019 data, the modes across the ages have become more advanced.

A constant and prominent mode is gaze. The characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel cannot escape the male gaze that follows them throughout the ages. This thesis argues that gaze contributes to how other modes, such as gesture/positioning and costume, are featured. In DC's figure 15, Wonder Woman's skirt has become shorter and in some images, it is viewed as spandex. In Marvel's figure 15, the image on the right shows that Ms Marvel's costume is skintight in order for her breasts to be shown.

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are iconic characters in their universes and have undergone several changes with each new era or editorial teams. These characters have gone on to become strong female characters that do not fit the traditional gender norms and roles associated with their gender. However, the representation of these characters remains through a hegemonic perspective, and deviation from this perspective could bring the end or backlash to the character. The discussion for change and gender equality in comic books has become more popular in the comic book community and has sparked a debate over whether there is a need for any form of change to take place.

Chapter 6 presents the discussion on the approach of intertextuality and dialogicality. In this chapter, insight is provided into the relationship between text and images in the comic books, with a further discussion on the intertextual aspects of images. Furthermore, the discussion on dialogicality focuses on the various voices that are employed in the comic books. Characters' interactions with each other, narrations, and the comic books all have their own voice that the reader needs to take into account.



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Chapter 6: Intertextuality and Dialogicality

6.1. Introduction

The roles of text in comic books are crucial for the development of the narrative, insight into the thoughts of the characters, the development of relationships between the characters, as well as to build relationships between the characters and reader through dialogue. This chapter discusses the notion of intertextuality, which refers to understanding how certain images make intertextual references and build on previous images, text and phrases. This addresses the dynamic relationship between the images in the panels that display the narrative and the text that builds on these images.

The second point of discussion in this chapter is the notion of dialogicality. Comic books are a complex maze of voices from internal character monologues to external dialogue between the characters, along with overhead narration. Comic books contain several voices, each with their own purpose of guiding and speaking to the reader through the comic book. These voices contribute to the development of a character's personality and how they are perceived by the audience. Through the discussion of dialogicality, insight is provided into the complexity of the various voices that are present in comic books.

6.2. Intertextuality

Text in comic books contributes to a deeper level of understanding of the narrative that is being displayed by the images. Text can refer to another text in a certain situation in the narrative. Comic books are a crucial part of popular culture, therefore making them sources for other forms of media to use as references and vice versa. However, image is equally as important as text in the sense that, if comic books were not text-based, it would not be classified as a comic book. There is a balance between the two modes, and this is important for the discussion of intertextuality, as previously discussed in the section on intertextuality (chapter 3, section 3.3). As previously discussed, images from the discussion of intertextuality as it includes other spheres of media such as film and art (Shakib, 2013).

Comic books consist of an entire universe of characters and narratives that interact with each other, but this is only relevant to the specific comic book universe that is associated with the

comic book publisher. This means that Wonder Woman does not interact with characters from the Marvel universe and the same can be said about Captain Marvel interacting with characters from the DC universe. This does not alter the notion that these respective characters cannot interact with characters in their own universe; in relation to intertextuality, it builds on their own narratives and vice versa. For example, in some cases, readers need to read another comic book to understand the current narrative in the selected comic book, i.e. Captain Marvel is a member of The Avengers and is featured in an Avengers issue. The events that take place may affect her narrative, therefore the creator may include a text stating that readers should read a specific issue of The Avengers to understand the current narrative.

The images in Marvel's figure 19 below provide an example of how comic books themselves are used as intertextual devices to build and refer to another text, and in this case, as narrative. Both texts refer to comic books that the reader should read to be familiar with the current narrative. The authors have placed these texts in this specific context to refer to another text. This further allows the reader of the comic book to have a better understanding and meaning of the narrative that is taking place.



Avengers Unplugged #5 (1995) *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #16 (1964)
Figure 19.

The data in Marvel's figure 19 shows the intertextual relationship between comic books, in that the text from a previous comic book builds on the text in another comic. Kristeva (1986), cited in Johnstone (2008), discussed how text builds on other texts. In this case, a reader would need to read the narrative from *Captain Marvel* #2 in order to understand the narrative in *Avengers Unplugged* #5.

The traditional notion of intertextuality focuses on the relationship between text and how they build on each other. Wang (2014), citing the work of Barthes (1977), explained how images and text are complementary. Wang (2014) further discussed that images are constructed around the text. In relation to the data collected, intertextuality has a significant influence in building

a character's development and narrative, because texts that feature in the narrative refer to larger and realistic texts. Wonder Woman's creation is centred on Greek Mythology, thus there are several references to Greek lore. In creating the character's narrative around this mythology, many of her stories makes intertextual reference to classic Greek mythological gods or goddesses and creatures, as seen in the data collected from *Wonder Woman #0* (2012), and *Wonder Woman #17* (2019), that made reference to the Minotaur.

This application of Greek Mythology in Wonder Woman may deviate from the traditional notion of intertextuality that focuses on a more direct text rather than entire narratives and characters. However, a fundamental aspect in comic books is text and how it contributes to the narrative, either through a direct or indirect manner. In Captain Marvel for instance, there are several texts that are used to contribute to narratives in the sense that the text may act as a theme for a particular issue. This can be seen in Marvel's figure 20 below that makes reference to a popular song and slogan. Comic books draw inspiration from real-life events that shaped history, and popular culture are the texts related to these events.

Although the characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel do not resemble Rosie the Riveter, it has been mentioned by some of their creators and scholars that the characters were inspired by her. This becomes more apparent in Marvel's figure 6, in which Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel makes reference to the iconic image of Rosie with her catchphrase, "We can do it!" By referring to this image of Rosie the Riveter, the creators made a statement regarding the role of women in society. Werner (2004) states that the interpretation of these images is influenced by an internal and external force beyond the image frame, however, this front cover is explicit in referencing Rosie the Riveter.

Captain Marvel has made a few references throughout the several characters that have taken on the title. In 2014, *Captain Marvel #9* made reference to David Bowie's 1973 album cover *Aladdin Sane*, as the narrative had Captain Marvel assisting and befriending an inter-galactic musician. This shows a lighter and fictional aspect of Marvel comic books referring to a moment of popular culture and David Bowie's iconic electric bolt make-up on the left eye. This is an example of how an image and text build on each other and make reference to other images in society. This front cover of *Captain Marvel #9* builds on the narrative that unfolds in this issue. Marvel uses their voice to shed light on an older issue of Captain Marvel. In 1994, as South Africa was entering a new phase, *Captain Marvel issue #1* (1994) followed the narrative of Monica dealing with racism and discrimination. This front cover included

references to a popular song by En Vogue, “Free your mind” (1992), along with the “No Hate” banner, as seen in Marvel’s figure 20.

The inclusion of the song title and chorus brings along the meaning of the song as it deals with the discrimination and racism that black women face. The chorus of the song reads “*Free your mind and the rest will follow. Be colour blind, don’t be so shallow*”. In a sense the creators made a statement through the cover of this issue as ‘Free Your Mind’ was a popular song and received high acclaim for being an anti-discrimination anthem. The “No Hate” banner further contributes to the narrative and the message the creators are sending to their audience, the inclusion of this banner refers to the movement of No/Stop Hate.



Captain Marvel #1 (1994)
Figure 20.

Marvel’s Figure 20 further elaborates on the notion of Wang (2014) as to how text contributes to the construction of the images used in a comic book. The use of the lyrics from En Vogue’s ‘Free Your Mind’ song and the ‘No Hate’ banner indicates that the image and narrative would focus on anti-discrimination sentiment. Furthermore, the text contributes to the theme of the comic book which centres on racism and discrimination. These images and themes can be linked back to the notion that Werner (2004) discussed in relation to how images are interpreted by internal and external forces beyond the frame of an image.

These interpretations are affected by our own understanding of social issues that occur within society, as it has been mentioned that comic books often portray societal issues for the character to be relatable to the reader. This data in Marvel's figure 20 is an indication of how images and text work as a collective in making intertextual references to the external forces outside of the picture frame. Because many people face racial discrimination in society, the purpose of this comic book was to shed light on the discrimination that individuals encounter.

Werner (2004) states that a picture's meaning is influenced by the physical and social climate; this becomes more evident in comic books as characters are often shown dealing with current social issues. Furthermore, Werner (2004:13) discusses the various forms of intertextuality in images, a notion referred to as visual quoting: "sometimes political cartoons, commercial advertisements and journalistic photos incorporate borrowed themes, symbols, or compositional elements from famous images". The data collected from Wonder Woman's narrative, the theme of Greek mythology, and her role in World War II can be viewed as visual quoting, as some symbols and images were incorporated into the narrative of Wonder Woman. This made the images and narratives in Wonder Woman intertextual as they made reference and built on previous texts or images from another form of media.

A previous notion discussed in this thesis has been the relationship between Carol Danvers, Wonder Woman and Rosie the Riveter. In Marvel's figure 6, Captain Marvel borrowed the symbolic and iconic image of Rosie the Riveter's "*We Can Do It!*" In relation to the notion of visual quoting, the editorial team evoked a new meaning as this was the second issue that featured Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel. Because Rosie the Riveter became an iconic woman and symbol that had a significant impact on the role women had during World War II, by referring back to this image the editorial team is delivering a message to the reader that women can do anything. The use of the image of Rosie was even more symbolic as this was the first time a woman was the editor of Captain Marvel. While the text is not included on the cover, the image delivers the message to the audience.

The text can be read alongside the image/theme in Marvel's figure 20 while in Marvel's figure 6 the text is read in relation to the theme of the comic book in that it sets up the narrative. In Marvel's figure 6, there is no text included on the cover; however, due to the nature of this image, it serves as reference to the text and can be interpreted alongside the image. As the image of Rosie is an iconic image in popular culture and has been the source for other artists,

this does require the reader to understand who Rosie the Riveter was and the symbolism behind her image.

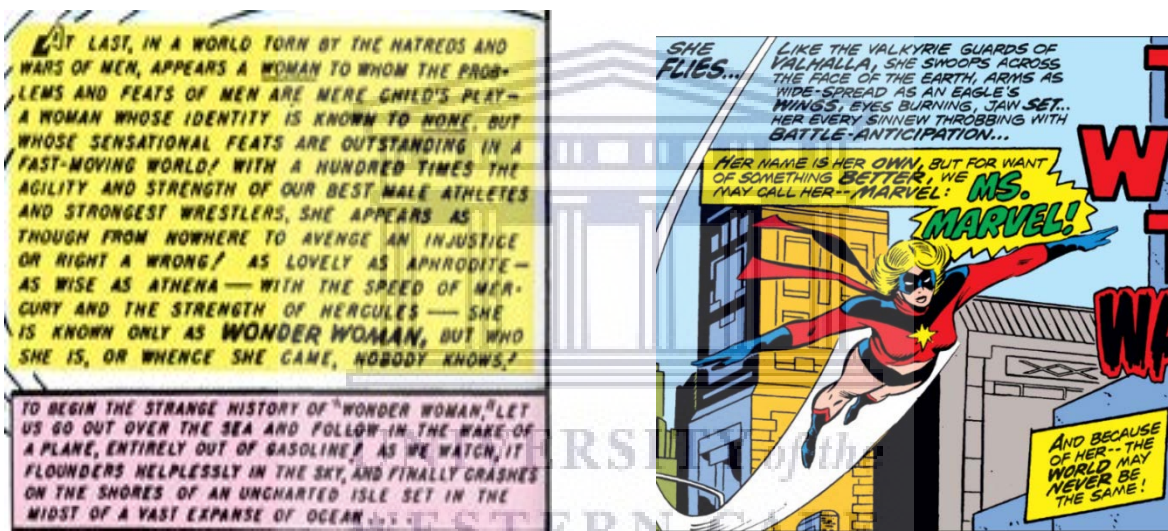
In relation to the data collected from Wonder Woman, the images are read alongside the text and themes; due to the narrative of Wonder Woman being centred on Greek Mythology, there is a strong reference to this. While other narratives have been centred around societal issues, such as World War II and similar, in the issue, *Rescue Angel* (2014), which showcases Wonder Woman coming to the rescue of American soldiers under attack in Afghanistan, this is a direct reference to the American soldiers in Afghanistan and the ongoing tension between The United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In this instance, the comic book *Rescue Angel* (2014) made reference to the war and was influenced by an external social force.

By adding images, themes and situations from society, comic books become instruments of intertextuality, as Marvel and DC comic books, as well as other comic book publishers, have proven to be the case. Intertextuality provides an opportunity for comic books to incorporate social issues and include iconic images or situations from society in order for the reader to identify with the narrative or characters. This can be seen in the data collected from Marvel's figures 6 and 20, along with Wonder Woman's narratives that made reference to social issues. While comic books are in some cases used as references in other forms of media and popular culture, comic books rely on intertextuality for a deeper and more personal narrative structure and character development.

By making intertextual reference to societal issues and events, comic book creators are pulling their characters out of their fantasy world and placing them into situations that some readers may find relatable. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel have shifting narratives as their narratives are not linear but rather dimensional, meaning that each comic requires the development of the character and narrative; thus, it expands into various narratives and side characters being added. The traditional notion of intertextuality relates to the analysis of text and how text builds on each other. Comic books have provided a new dimension to the notion of intertextuality. The text is read alongside the images and vice versa, with a further inclusion of themes that the narratives follow in a comic book series or in special editions.

6.3. Dialogicality

Comic books provide an interesting approach and application of the notion of dialogicality, as comic book creators have created an entire universe that includes dialogic aspects in the narratives of the characters. Hudson (2010) discussed the notion of comic books employing two active voices, the writer's and the artist that creates the comic book. This is similar to the notion discussed under intertextuality, as the relationship between the text and image need to complement each other. Comic books provide several voices and perspectives, each with their own tone and register, which allows the reader to distinguish who is speaking. An important feature in comic books is narration, which provides the reader with an overview of the character and gives the reader the perspective of someone observing the narrative.



Wonder Woman #1 (1941)

Ms Marvel #1 (1968)

Figure 21.

As comic books are non-verbal in the sense that they belong to the larger discourse of print media, the editorial team relies on texts which are meant to be read in different voices, tones and registers/accents. The editorial team may also include slang or words that are specific to a location, e.g. in the case of Spiderman speaking with a New York accent. The data collected from *Wonder Woman #1* (1941) and *Ms Marvel #1* (1968), as shown in figure 21 above, provides an example of narration from the first issues of the characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. The purpose of the narration is to provide the reader with background on the character and this is normally a description as to how the hero came to be. Furthermore, the purpose of narration is to provide the reader with details from previous issues as the series

progresses and the plot becomes more complicated. Narration updates the reader to the events that took place in a previous issue or another comic book series.

In terms of the voice of narration, it appears in a different style compared to other voices in the comic book, as seen in the data in figure 21. The tone of voice in narration is grand and in some sense more dramatic compared to the other voices in the comic book, such as the characters in dialogue with each other or internal monologues. Hudson (2010) described the manner of style narration as “a parodic stylization of a high epic” (Bakhtin, cited in Hudson, 2010:41). This notion becomes more apparent in relation to the data in figure 21, as the words are meant to be read as a high epic style, a style of speech that is similar to that of Shakespearean plays.

The reader needs to take note of the tone, register and voice of the narration, as it differs from the other voices in comic books. This requires the reader to switch between the voices in order to follow the narrative through the dialogue. The characters in comic books provide a new depth in terms of register, tone and voices as this allows the editorial team to assign personalities and characteristics to the characters. In relation to the structure of narration with its high style, the approach to the character differs, in that their tone is dependent on their characteristics.

Previously the example used was Spiderman speaking with a New York accent which the reader is familiar with. Batman, on the other hand, grew up in the city of Gotham which is a fictional city. Readers are not familiar with the sound of this accent as Gotham City can be similar to New York or Chicago. Therefore, the text in the speech bubble is crucial as Batman needs to come across as being more mature, dark and mysterious. Similar to Batman is Wonder Woman who is from the fictional island of Themyscira, therefore her accent is unknown, but from reading the comic books one can understand that Wonder Woman is reserved, formal and mature as she acts as an ambassador of Themyscira. The tone and manner of voice between the narration and character interaction provides an example of how the editorial team distinguishes between the two types of voices. In DC’s figure 22 below, it becomes evident.



Figure 22: Wonder Woman #99 (1958).

In DC's figure 22 the image on the right in the yellow speech bubble describes Wonder Woman's action, "*Instantly, the fearless Wonder Woman leaped high into the air*". While the narration describes Wonder Woman as fearless throughout the issue, she is referred to as "my angel" by her love interest. The data in DC's figure 22 shows the two types of voices in comic books, one of narration and one of dialogue. This further draws the two different perspectives on how the character of Wonder Woman is perceived and is meant to be perceived – fearless as she leaps into action; however, the second voice of Steve is a term of endearment. In relation to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of two voices, two meanings and two expressions, this portion of data provides insight into the notion of double voice, meaning and expression.

Exchanges between characters are indicated in the speech bubbles, narration is featured in a different colour than the dialogue between characters, while the character's inner thoughts / monologue is drawn in the form of a cloud. It is crucial that the reader knows the difference between the various voices, that is why comic book artists and writers use different modes such as colour to indicate the different voices of narration, thoughts and dialogue. These voices coexist with each other as each voice has its own purpose i.e. dialogue for story development. The data in Marvel's figure 23 provides insight into how the various voices coexist with each other and deliver a narrative.



*Captain Marvel #2 (2012)
Figure 23.*

The data in Marvel’s figure 23 shows the two voices on a single page. The text in red and blue in the first panel are the thoughts of Captain Marvel, as she questions the possibility of time travel. In the second and third panels the dialogue between the characters is indicated through the speech bubbles. This data is an instance where two voices are speaking. Each voice is shown in its own panel, but there are instances in which the voices do occur simultaneously, such as in DC’s figure 22. Hudson (2010:48) states that “on the page of the graphic novel each voice speaks simultaneously with the others, and it is up to the reader to decide which if any voice takes primacy over the rest”. The reasoning behind this is that voices of dialogue, narration and inner thought could occur simultaneously. The inner thoughts of the character in some comic books may provide humour, as the character may question the narrative or the other character’s intentions.

Beyond the notion of comic book characters being in dialogue with each other, the application of dialogicality provides an opportunity to see how the comic book creators add their own voices, either through the character’s dialogue, monologue or thoughts. The previous section of intertextuality elaborated on the social and political references that are included in the comic books. In relation to dialogicality, Michael Holquist (1990:49) states that “In dialogism, life is expression, expression means making meaning and meaning comes about only through the medium of signs”. In this instance, comic books act as a medium of signs in the sense that

comic book creators include various social and political movements in their narratives, as seen in Marvel's figure 20 and in Wonder Woman's early issues that dealt with World War II.

This notion by Holquist (1990) relates to the comic book creators adding their opinions and perspectives into their comics. Comic books and their characters are mediums of the signs in terms of meaning being made and expressed through the comic book and the respective characters. An example of this can be found in the use of Wonder Woman as an instrument of propaganda during World War II and *Captain Marvel issue # 1* (1994). In the recent issue of Captain Marvel, following the narrative of Carol Danvers who is a pilot in the Air Force, Marvel used this opportunity to shine a light on women in the armed forces. This opens up a larger discussion of how comic books will deal with recent social and political movements such as the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements in their comic books.

Comic books employ several voices and viewpoints to give the reader a full perspective on the narrative, with the inclusion of the narrative from the main character, secondary character and villain. Each of these characters has their own tone, voice, register, and their own viewpoint on the subject matter on which the narrative is based. The reader needs to distinguish between the voices, as seen in figure 21, with the data collected on narration, and in DC's figure 22 when narration and internal thought appear simultaneously. It is crucial that the creators find the correct tone when addressing these social and political movements, in the sense that when addressing sensitive issues, creators do not want their comic books to come across as being one-sided. Instead, the comic book should spark a discussion amongst their audience rather than dividing it. The characters' voices would therefore be the instruments contributing to the discussion with different perspectives and voices being included.

The characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel each have their own personality traits and their own voices; however, they share an interest in similar subject matters. It is crucial that each character has their own voice as this contributes to the development of the character in question. Marvel and DC comic books are viewed as being the two leading comic book publishers in the comic book industry and larger print media community. Their added perspectives and opinions on certain subject matters are brought forward through the voices of their characters and narratives to reach those in the comic book community.

Marvel and DC comic books have an entire universe of characters, each with their own perspectives and voices; these characters are unique and beloved by those in the comic book community. Dialogicality highlights the importance of the various voices in Wonder Woman

and Captain Marvel, because these voices contribute to the development of the narrative, whether through the narration, dialogue between the characters, or the inner thoughts of the characters. While some voices and perspectives act as a means of expression driven by the creators' and publishers' agendas that are beyond the progression of the narrative, there is an opportunity for meaning to be made from these expressions in relation to the matters being discussed.

6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, the relationship between image and text were discussed and analysed. The relationship between these two modes are crucial in the development of the narrative. Wang (2014) addressed how these two modes need to complement each other. Both text and image need to relate to each other in order for the reader to make sense of the narrative that takes place in the comic book. Werner (2004) discussed that an image's meaning is influenced by social forces in society, such as in figure 20, and the several references Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman made to Rosie the Riveter.

The role of the voice in comic books is as crucial as the dynamic relationship between image and text. Through the analysis of dialogicality, this thesis has gained an insightful perspective into the role of several voices in comic books. Beyond the Shakespearean speech style of narration, the voices act as a means of expression in which the characters voice their opinions of events unfolding in the narrative. This notion of expression, as discussed by Holquist (1990), provides an opportunity for the editorial team to insert their own perspectives and ideas in the voices of the characters to address various societal issues.

Chapter 7: A Queer and Intersectional Analysis

7.1. Introduction

Comic book characters are complex, and each of them have their own personality traits that make them unique. These unique personalities provide comic book narratives with the drama, action and comedy one would find in a television series or film. This chapter discusses the various aspects that contribute to these personalities, namely Queer Theory and Intersectionality. Queer Theory discusses the heteronormative and hypersexualized representation of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, but this portion further discusses how Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel have challenged the hetero-norm in their representations.

The second discussion in this chapter is on intersectionality which brings together the various intersecting aspects that contribute to the overall representation and identity of the characters, Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, in terms of the aspects that make them unique to their audience, as well as providing insight into the characters themselves. Comic book characters are created for the reader to identify themselves with, therefore a discussion on intersectionality dives deeper into the complexities of these characters.

7.2. Queer Theory

The application of queer theory provides an interesting discussion in terms of Wonder Woman as she is both subject to the hetero-norm and its greatest challenger. In being a subject of the hetero-norm, Wonder Woman is represented by various modes that contribute to her overall image, such as the instances of her in bondage, the arched back, and the various modes that contribute to the overall image being sexualized. These all contribute to the notion of subjectivity and how women are subjected to men even in the realm of fantasy, as the comic book industry is a predominantly male-driven industry. In conducting this data analysis, it is an inescapable shadow that is constantly present.

The image of Wonder Woman is represented in accordance with this hetero-norm in terms of the hypersexualization that is a running theme throughout her history. Wonder Woman is presented with masculine abilities equal, and in some cases, more superior to that of her male counterparts, but to reduce this she is sexualized and pushed back into the gender norms of

heteronormativity. Her character was created to challenge the hetero-norm (Daniels, 2000:22-23, cited in Emad, 2006: 982), according to Wonder Woman's creator, William Marston: "Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world... What woman lacks is the dominance or self-assertive power to put over and enforces her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every way".

The creation of Wonder Woman was a disruption to the hetero-norm, especially during the crucial period of World War II, viewed as breaking the norm during a time in which women were meant to be submissive and had no means of contributing to the war efforts. Wonder Woman was viewed as a challenger to the status quo of a woman's role during World War II, despite her role as an instrument of propaganda. She represented a strong determination of woman and is viewed as a feminist icon that contributed to the larger discourse of the women's movement. In analysing the data from Wonder Woman's comic books, one can break it down to the image of Wonder Woman versus the characteristics of Wonder Woman, the characteristics being her abilities and personality.

Images of Wonder Woman are viewed through a heteronormative lens of how a woman's body should be represented, i.e. of being desirable. This is done through the various modes. This can be seen in the data from DC's figure 7, which shows the progression of Wonder Woman through the ages and how the modes have developed. In relation to queer theory, however, it points out the heteronormative development of Wonder Woman, of how she was represented in her first appearance with a modest skirt to a shorter and tighter pants.

Comic book creators cater to a heteronormative society in their narratives in which comic books contribute to young readers' understanding of gender norms and behaviour, as discussed by Brown (1999). A trope that is overused often is the damsel in distress trope, in which a young woman is captured by a sly villain in the hopes that the superhero, the male protagonist, will save the damsel and defeat the sly villain. Wonder Woman set a new path for women in comic books in that she was both the hero and in some cases the damsel, but who was more than capable of saving herself. This speaks to the larger notion of a woman, an independent woman capable of saving herself without the assistance of a man and can save the men if need be, as seen in the first issue of *Wonder Woman #1* (1941) when she rescued Steve Trevor. These characteristics of self-assertiveness and dominance which Marston discussed is brought about through the heroism of Wonder Woman.

The characteristics of Wonder Woman differ from the image of Wonder Woman, in terms of her personality and abilities. Wonder Woman is represented with characteristics that challenge the traditional norm of how a woman should behave, as she leads not only women into battle but men as well. Her characteristics do not revolve around the traditional gender norms and, by extension, she is the greatest challenger to the traditional gender norms that dominate the DC comic book universe. Some view Wonder Woman as a queer icon as she breaks down the traditional barriers that confine gender norms. Over the years, Wonder Woman's sexuality has become a source of discussion as some view her as being a lesbian, bisexual or queer. Despite that, Wonder Woman has been in a relationship with Captain Steve Trevor in the comic books.

This questioning of Wonder Woman's sexuality provides an opportunity to understand how she is portrayed, in the sense that she stands against the hetero-norm and is a feminist icon – but does this make her a queer icon? Wonder Woman embodies female masculinity as she challenges traditional gender norms and rules. This addresses the larger concept of when a woman goes against the traditional notion of gender norms and rules by challenging them through her appearance or qualities, she must be queer when in fact she is not. This corresponds to the article published by Buzzfeed in which three masculine female characters' sexuality was questioned, as they did not conform to traditional gender norms and rules.

The representation of women who subscribe to masculine traits fall victim to the heteronormative behaviour of society. As mentioned previously, when Wonder Woman appears in an action sequence alongside her male counterparts, her body is read differently. While she appears masculine, there is an inclusion of a sexualized component, either through the modes of gesture, costume or gaze, as seen in DC's figure 10. The article from Buzzfeed is an example that points to the issue that when a woman subscribes to masculine traits, either through her appearance or characteristics, she should be queer as her masculinity is not the same as that of her male counterparts. Thus, the discussion about the inclusion of both queer and non-queer individuals in the notion of female masculinity is one to consider.

Wonder Woman is a fundamental character in the DC universe and can be considered the matriarch of DC comic books, being the first female character published by DC comic books. She challenged the status quo of women in comic books who were previously associated with needing to be saved. DC comic books created a path for more female characters as the superhero rather than the damsel in need of saving.

In the DC cinematic universe, the first appearance of Wonder Woman was in the film *Batman vs Superman* (2017) and gave the audience a new perspective of Wonder Woman. A pivotal scene is when Wonder Woman saves Batman from Doomsday by jumping in front of and deflecting the beam with her wristband that was about to kill him. Superman appears in the scene while the heroes regroup. While Wonder Woman questions the creation of the creature of Doomsday, the following dialogue takes place:

Wonder Woman: This thing, this creature, seems to feed on energy.

Superman: This thing is from another world. My world.

Wonder Woman: [drawing her sword] I've killed things from other worlds before.

[Superman glances over to Batman] Superman: Is she with you?

[Batman turns to Superman confused] Batman: I thought she was with you.

This scene was well executed and encompasses the abilities and characteristics of Wonder Woman. The question, “*is she with you?*” provides an interesting introduction of Wonder Woman in the DC cinematic universe. She is neither associated with Batman nor Superman; she is in fact her own character and not attached to a male identity such as Batgirl or Supergirl. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the scene addresses the issue of a woman not needing to be associated with a man or needing a man to save her, when in fact she can save him. In the film, all three characters are equal and assist each other in defeating Doomsday. The film breaks away from sexualizing Wonder Woman but rather portrays her as a fierce warrior, which resonated well with the audience and saw success in her solo film.

A strong and self-assertive character such as Wonder Woman provides an opportunity for young women to envision themselves as the iconic superhero. Wonder Woman and women in general have the characteristics that allow them to be great role models. Wonder Woman follows the middle path in between challenging the hetero-norm and being subjected to it. Comic book creators present Wonder Woman as this strong, self-assertive and dominant superhero, but her image remains in the heteronormative domain.

The comic books industry is trying to make improvements in how their characters are represented, especially in a society that values gender equality, and a growing number of women reading comic books. DC comic books have a character that has been included in their works for 79 years, a character that has evolved over time with the brand and has become one

of the key characters within the brand's identity. The character of Wonder Woman has a long history and has been represented as a constant present in the DC comic book universe, and is viewed as being one of the three most popular characters in the universe along with Superman and Batman.

In the Marvel comic books, the role of Captain Marvel has gone through several changes with the title being held by two men and three women, but it is the character of Carol Danvers that shares several characteristics with Wonder Woman. Marvel created a character that broke the gender norm with the inclusion of Monica Rambeau. The character of Carol Danvers was introduced in *Captain Marvel issue #1* (1968) and held a senior position at a military base and continued to have an extensive military career such as being an Air Force pilot. There is a 27-year gap between the introduction of Wonder Woman and Carol Danvers, coming from two different publishing houses and different creators; they share several characteristics in terms of shaping the role of women in comic books. Carol Danvers, from her first appearance as Ms Marvel (1977), challenged the notion of what it meant to be a woman in the comic book universe.

The creators chose to describe Ms Marvel as “*This female fights back*” and “*At last a bold new super-heroine in the senses-stunning tradition of Spider-Man!*”, seen in Marvel's figure 14, the image on the left. Through this description, the creators shaped a new perspective on the role of women in comic books, and a new role as a superhero, fighter and protector. By describing Ms Marvel/Carol Danvers through characteristics often associated with male characters set a precedent for how this character would continue to change and defy the heteronormative domain of comic books, both in the Marvel comic book universe and with the audience of Marvel comic books. Marvel comics continues to present Carol as a woman who defies the status quo of gender norms and rules in the series of Captain Marvel.

While Carol Danvers is a character who has become an iconic Captain Marvel, her predecessor Monica Rambeau embodies the same type of spirit. In the *Amazing Spider Annual #16* (1964), Monica challenged her superior officer about her role in the harbour she worked at, as she was passed over for the position of captain and the positions were filled by men. This addressed real-life events in that some employers would rather hire a man than a woman and if a woman was hired, she would endure difficulty in reaching the same position as her male counterparts. Comic books, as a form of the larger discourse of print media, address issues that are in society. However, in terms of equal representation, comic book creators must be aware of what their

audience reads and enjoys. In the case of Monica's employment, it was a predominant male-driven career and thus men were viewed as being more capable of doing the job.

It speaks to the superior aspect attached to Queer Theory in which one individual is viewed as being more superior than another, as a man should always be in charge. Monica was never appointed to the position of captain as she quit her job to take on her new role as Captain Marvel, a path that she made her own and earned. If you take into consideration the time at which Monica was introduced as a character in the comic book universe, a black woman in a predominately white comic book universe, with the exception of a few black male superheroes, was a significant move for Marvel comics to make. Monica became one of the challengers of the status quo of a white hetero-norm in terms of her racial identity. Monica was presented as having qualities associated with female masculinity that challenged traditional gender norms and rules that were present in society.

Both Monica and Carol operate outside the hetero-norm in the sense that they redefine the traditional notions associated with their race and gender, as they equally challenge the status quo in their respective narratives. Recently, after the release of Captain Marvel's live action film *Captain Marvel* (2018) and her inclusion in the *Avengers Endgame* (2019) movie, this resulted in some speculation around Captain Marvel's sexuality. As in the case of Wonder Woman, when a woman presents herself as being masculine and takes on masculine traits/personas or is even viewed as being "tomboy", she is queered. This, in a sense, is understandable as Marvel's and DC's cinematic universes have not featured any queer characters as a solo feature character in the film franchise. The same discussion around the sexuality of male characters has been mentioned in the comic book community.

Captain Marvel, in both the comic book series and films, has been represented as masculine or embodying traits that are associated with masculinity, therefore the image of Carol as Captain Marvel is different from the image of Ms Marvel. Towards the end of the Ms Marvel series in 1978, Ms Marvel appears in a new costume, and during the series that ran from 2006 to 2010, Ms Marvel's image was more sexualized, as seen in the data collected in Marvel's figure 15. However, the characteristics of Carol remained unchanged despite this sudden hypersexualization and change in the image of Ms Marvel. In this case, the image followed a standard approach of how women were represented in comic books. In *Gender Difference in Comics* (2002), Robbins describes the body traits associated with female characters. The bodily traits become an unspoken norm in the representation of women in comic books as it follows the

hetero-normative perspective of women and their bodies being subject to the male gaze and opinions.

When Carol appeared in her new role as Captain Marvel, creators took a different approach in how they wanted her to be represented, an opportunity to break away from the traditional style of representing women in comic books. The image of Carol and her characteristics began to align with each other in the sense that the images of Carol as Captain Marvel were strong and empowering to the reader, even as the creators compared her to Rosie the Riveter on the first issue's cover of *Captain Marvel issue #1* (2012). As discussed previously, Rosie the Riveter was an iconic image in the women's movement during the Second World War and is a feminist icon.

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel have this in common as both characters refer to Rosie the Riveter. The creators of both characters draw on this iconic image as inspiration. These characters, in a sense, embody the characteristics of Rosie the Riveter in that they are defiant characters that challenge their respective hetero-norms in their universes. Both characters embody female masculinity and do not ascribe to the notion of being queer. In embodying female masculinity, the images of these characters are shaped around a hetero-normative ideal of a woman's image. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel both provide a space for women to take on non-traditional gender roles and bend the norms of gender identity, both in their comic book universes, the comic book community, and the larger society.

Marvel and DC comic books are situated in a hegemonic masculine domain in which men are represented as being hypermasculine and idolized, while female characters are represented as being subjected to a male-dominated audience and creators. Marvel and DC comic books are making changes in terms of adding more diverse characters to their respective universes. The fate of the characters will be left to the perspectives of the comic book community on whether or not to accept characters that challenge the hetero-norm, as in the case of Mockingbird that was boycotted by members of the comic book community. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel have various components that intersect and contribute to how they are viewed by their audiences; these various components shape the narratives and the identities that the characters themselves ascribe to.

7.3. Intersectionality

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are complex characters as there are various intersecting factors that contribute to their narratives and identities. This portion of the data analysis discusses the various factors such as sexuality, class, gender and race that contribute to the overall images of these characters in the respective universes. As the data has shown, Wonder Woman has remained the same character since her first appearance in 1941, and while there have been several interpretations of Wonder Woman, social forces such as race, class and gender have remained constant. In relation to gender, Wonder Woman set in motion a movement in the DC comic book universe and larger comic book community.

By being the first female character in a mainstream comic book, Wonder Woman's gender was represented by a female. However, her superhero abilities (super strength, speed and agility) were more associated with that of a male superhero. Her gender paved a way forward for other comic book creators to include more women in comic books in the role of a superhero rather than the classic damsel in distress. In collecting and analysing the data of Wonder Woman in relation to the first system that governs intersectionality, the lived experience presents the social forces that contribute to the observed practices which, in this study, would be the data of Wonder Woman. The social forces that contribute to the creation and depiction of Wonder Woman can be traced back to World War II as this was a social force that contributed to the role of Wonder Woman as man's protector and encouraged women to become more active in the war efforts.

However, the war was not the only driving social force that contributed to the development of Wonder Woman. The suffrage movement and various other feminist movements influenced the development of Wonder Woman, as many scholars such as Emad (2006) and Darowski (2013) have cited the role that the feminist movement had in shaping the narrative and creation of Wonder Woman. After the war, the social forces changed, as did the depiction of Wonder Woman, as seen in the data collected in DC's figure 7; this takes place in the Silver Age (1958) until the New Age (present). The male gaze became a social force that contributed to the representation of Wonder Woman, as her image became more sexualized. In becoming a social force, the male gaze came into conflict with the feminist forces that Wonder Woman found her roots in. These two social forces would become the leading social forces in Wonder Woman, while other real-life events would be included as minor social forces.

This is seen in the data collected in which Wonder Woman's characteristics represent that of a strong and independent woman, but the image of Wonder Woman was shaped behind the notion of what a woman should be by her male audience and creators. An overall social force that contributes to the representation of Wonder Woman and the larger representation of women in comic books is the gender norms and rules associated with being a woman in society. Gender norms and rules are reinforced by institutions and individuals that believe women should have more traditional roles such as being caregivers, rather than the provider (Glick and Fiske, 1997, cited in Facciani *et al.*, 2015).

The second system that governs the theory of intersectionality is the dynamic nature of intersections. In relation to this system, there are several institutions and individuals that contribute to the representation of Wonder Woman. As discussed previously, each creative team has their own approach to how they want to represent Wonder Woman. DC comic books created a character that defies the traditional notion of what it means to be a woman while still embodying femininity. Wonder Woman is represented as being masculine, yet she still retains her femininity.

DC comic books as an institution and Wonder Woman's creative teams follow a middle path in representing her as a strong feminist icon that young girls and women can admire. However, there are instances in which she is sexualized which creates a gendered society in comic books, where female characters are represented unequally to their male counterparts. This is indicated by the data collected from the selected Wonder Woman comic books, and the analysis on the modes such as gesture, gaze and costume along with the broken-back phenomenon. This perpetuates the unequal representation of women, not just in comic books as being subjective to men and objects of their gaze, but also in the larger discourse of the media.

In his book, *The Ages of Wonder Woman: Essay on the Amazon Princess in changing times* (2014), Joseph Darowski presents an interesting perspective on the careers that Wonder Woman was assigned throughout her lifetime. Darowski (2014) stated that Wonder Woman's career path followed a less steady path than her male counterparts such as Superman and Batman, but this does not distract from the importance of Wonder Woman as a feminist icon. Darowski (2014) cites this because the creators are not able to figure her out, rather than it being a fault in her character.

In the early years, Wonder Woman was assigned stereotypical gendered careers such as a nurse and secretary. This addresses the second system of intersectionality by assigning her a career

that is deemed appropriate for women. Beyond these stereotypical careers, Wonder Woman has also worked at the United Nations and briefly at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), while more recently her career prospects have stalled. In examining the social forces of race, class, gender and sexuality, the third system of intersectionality, mutual constitution states that these social forces are all linked and cannot exist unto themselves (Levon, 2015). All these social forces work together to bring an image of a woman who is white, heterosexual and a princess with a background from Greek Mythology.

Wonder Woman's gender made her an iconic character as she was the first woman to be in a comic book, while her origins accounts for her gender identity, and her sex coming from a mythological island of only women. Her gender was a contributing aspect to her success as creators were able to reach a new demographic of young girls as their readership. While Wonder Woman's gender was groundbreaking and iconic in the feminist movement, her racial identity contributed to her acceptance as well, in the sense that one has to question whether a black female character would have been successful in a predominantly white male-driven industry and community in 1941. At the time of her introduction the trinity in the DC universe was composed of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman – all three characters are white in terms of racial identity.

Furthermore, Wonder Woman's racial identity and class coexist with each other, in the sense that she could have been from a middle- or lower-class upbringing that could relate to the readers that her intended audience can identify themselves with. Instead, her creator chose to make her a princess with an added Greek Mythology and fantasy narrative. These social forces contribute to Wonder Woman's image and are marketed towards an audience demographic, to show that a princess can be more than just needing saving and in fact, she can save her princes and the world.

Captain Marvel was introduced in the Marvel comic book universe 27 years after the first appearance of Wonder Woman, but it would be another 14 years before the title of Captain Marvel was held by a woman, Monica Rambeau, and another 30 years before Carol Danvers became the present Captain Marvel. As Captain Marvel has gone through several changes, throughout the lived experience of each character differed; the social forces that influenced Monica's narrative, image and identity differed from Carol's narrative, image and identity.

In the case of Monica Rambeau, in *Captain Marvel #1* (1994), the social force of racial segregation and discrimination influenced the narrative in this issue and addressed the larger

issue of how racial discrimination was inescapable even in the fantasy universe of comic books. In her first appearance in the *Amazing Spider Man #16* (1982), Monica challenges her superiors as to why she was passed over for a promotion, despite being an outstanding employee. In 2012, a new Captain Marvel appeared in the form of the familiar Carol Danvers, who had been present in the Marvel comic book universe as Ms Marvel. The data collected showed Carol's progression from her role as Ms Marvel to Captain Marvel. Carol's life was complicated because her memory had been wiped after being kidnapped, being pregnant, losing her powers, and then regaining them (Abad-Santos, 2016).

Carol's pregnancy while being held captive raised a lot of questions and this resulted in several articles speculating that Ms Marvel was raped while in captivity. Furthermore, Carol dealt with alcoholism and would later attend Alcoholics Anonymous in order to re-join the Avengers. Including these social issues of rape and addiction into a comic book can be controversial, especially if the creators do not represent it in a respectful and appropriate manner. The inclusion of these social issues drives a narrative that one can rise above their own social problems and maintain being a hero.

Marvel as an institution, and the creators of Ms Marvel and Captain Marvel, each brought with them their own interpretations as to how they would portray Carol in these roles. The 2006–2010 series of Ms Marvel chose to represent Carol in a more sexualized manner through her costume, unlike the previous series and the current representation of a strong and less sexualized Captain Marvel. This addresses the notion of gendering similar to the data collected from Wonder Woman; the data collected from this series showed a hypersexualized Ms Marvel. This perpetuates the norm in comic books that represents women as sexual objects and contributes to the unequal gendered society. Compared to their male counterparts, female superheroes are often represented with inaccurate features of how a woman's body should be, further contributing to a gendered society in which traits belong to a specific gender.

The comic book community and industry contribute to the racializing and gendering of characters; instances such as Riri Williams taking over from Tony Stark as Iron Man was met with some backlash from members in the comic book community. There was a strong resistance from the comic book community towards Jane Foster¹¹ taking over the role of Thor, as many comic book fans were upset by this. Both these characters belong to the Marvel comic

¹¹ Jane Foster is Thor's ex-girlfriend and ally. After Thor was deemed not worthy of wielding his magical hammer, Jane was transported to a moon on which the hammer was on and was granted the power associated with the hammer and Thor after lifting it (McDonald, 2015).

book universe, but this remains a constant issue within the comic book community, the racialization and gendering of characters. Issues of racializing and gendering characters are dividing the comic book community as some are calling for more diversity, while others want to maintain the same status quo of unchanging characters.

In comparison to the second portion of data, Wonder Woman is a linear character, as her social forces of race, gender, class and sexuality have been consistent throughout her narratives and several interpretations. Carol Danvers, the current Captain Marvel, is a white heterosexual middle-class woman, some social forces that she shares with Wonder Woman. Similar to Wonder Woman, Carol has held several jobs throughout her narrative since her Ms Marvel narrative. However, her careers differ from that of the stereotypical gendered careers that Wonder Woman's creators assigned to her. Carol was a NASA security officer, journalist at the Daily Bugle and an Air Force pilot; all these careers are traditionally thought to be careers that only men should occupy, especially Carol's extensive military career.

The individuals behind the creation of Carol Danvers gave her careers that were traditionally viewed as being for men and being male dominated, however, her ability to stay in one of her careers resembles a similar scenario to Wonder Woman who had several careers. This is a crucial aspect to consider, as both Diana Prince and Carol Danvers were constantly changing careers. Some may argue that it develops a deeper narrative for the character. In essence, it points to a larger problem of unequal representation between women and men in comic books; in comparison, the male characters of Batman and Iron Man, who share a similar narrative, both have stable careers.

In relation to their masculinity and masculine traits, Jack Halberstam argues in his book, *Female masculinity* (1998), that “masculinity, this book will claim becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle class body” (Halberstam, 1998:356). Masculinity has been associated with the male body, more specifically, the white male body of a class. In embodying their own version of masculinity, the creators of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, whether knowingly or unknowingly, created characters that rejected their traditional gendered roles and traits by representing these roles through female masculinity. While social forces such as class and race remain the same as masculinity, as addressed by Halberstam (1998), the masculinity that Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel embody becomes more legible as it is no longer attached to the male body. This further

elaborates the notion of female masculinity as its core value is masculinity that has left or is no longer associated with the male body.

Marvel and DC comic books are institutions that shape these characters and contribute to the overall image of these characters in terms of their narratives, identity, opinions and perspectives. These institutions are not the only sources that contribute to how these characters are perceived; the comic book community has significant influence in how these characters should develop. Furthermore, comic book creators have established that comic books should incorporate social and political issues that take place in society in the narratives of characters. The institutions are aware of this as the comic book community can have divided perspectives and opinions on the development of a character's identity, which includes social forces such as race, gender, sexuality and class. Furthermore, while individuals such as the creators of both comic book characters, go through several changes, the readers of comic books remain a consistent force in determining the success of a comic book character.

7.4. Conclusion

The characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are complex, as each of them have their own unique personalities. The data collected and analysed in relation to queer theory shows how both characters are represented within the hetero-norm, as they are represented as sexual objects. However, their characteristics differ from their representation in the sense that both Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are viewed as being progressive feminist characters, yet their representations are sexualized and does not correspond with their characteristics.

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel have different intersectional aspects. Captain Marvel is a title that several characters have held, each with their own intersecting aspects. Monica Rambeau's lived experience was different from those who had held the title before and after her as she is the only African American woman to hold the title. Wonder Woman broke through barriers and challenged the traditional notions of gendered norms and roles for women. After World War II, Wonder Woman followed an unsteady path. Unlike her male counterparts, Wonder Woman had a revolving door of careers that indicated that the creators were unable to figure her out (Darowski, 2014).

The intersecting forces that contribute to the development of the characters transcends the page of the comic book. These intersecting components of race, gender and class give the characters

more depth. It allows the creators to create narratives in which the reader is able to identify with the characters, and provides the creators an opportunity to address sensitive issues, such as in *Captain Marvel #1* (1994).

The following chapter, Chapter 8, is the final chapter and discusses the findings and limitations of the study.



Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1. Introduction

Marvel and DC comic books have established themselves as being key role players within the comic book community and pillars in the comic book industry. Each publisher has created characters that have become iconic and symbolic throughout the history of each publication and in popular culture. These characters have transcended beyond the pages of their comic books with films and video games based on individual characters. Comic books in general have gathered a mass following throughout the world with large events that occur such as ComicCon, which brings together comic book writers, artists, fans and actors within film franchises in one location.

8.2. Findings

In analysing and collecting data throughout the various ages of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, the changes in representing these characters is significant. Wonder Woman has remained the same character throughout the ages, while Captain Marvel has gone through several changes. There have been significant advancements in the instruments used to draw these characters, with each editorial team placing their own perspectives and ideas on how the characters should be represented and portrayed. However, there has been a request in recent years from those within the industry and the comic book community for more gender equality and diversity in various comic books, not only in the subject matter dealt with in this thesis.

It is evident in the data that through the various ages Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel have developed dramatically from their first appearance to their current appearance, as is shown in the data of this thesis. Through the application of the modes, the characters have become more sexualized in their representation, as seen in several figures discussed in the multimodal data analysis chapter. The female body has become an object of fantasy through the male gaze. In comic books, a woman's body is drawn from the perspective of men. While this approach in representing women in this manner can change, comic books have set a standard in terms of how women should be represented that may be difficult to deviate from.

How both men and women should be represented in comic books has become a discussion within the larger comic book community, as well as for the inclusion of more LGBTQI+ and diverse racial characters. Through analysing the data, one is able to understand that, when it comes to representing men in comic books, they are expressed differently compared to their female counterparts. Women in comic books appear to be masculine, however, when embodying their masculinity, it is overshadowed by the male gaze. An added component is that these characters are queered when embodying masculinity, in the sense that when an individual expresses masculinity or femininity, it should not confine them within the borders of a specific gender identity or expression.

The female body in Marvel and DC comic books is different from the societal representation; as comic books provide an escape from the real world, it faces real world issues regarding the representation of the female body. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers) are represented as being powerful, invincible and empowering characters, however, their bodies are viewed as being takeable. Notions such as Cocca's (2014) broken back test in DC's figure 10, Natale's (2013) depiction of female characters in bondage in DC's figure 9, and Robbins' (2002) issues regarding women being represented as sexual fantasies for young male readers are examples of this.

It has become an unspoken norm for comic book creators to represent their female characters with large breasts and draw them in positions in which certain features are more prominent. This contributes to the inaccurate representation and the imbalance between the genders in comic books. Brown (1999) addressed how comic books contribute to the norms and roles of gender. While female characters are represented as being masculine, their masculinity is represented differently in relation to the male counterparts. Female masculinity provided insight into a new domain of navigating masculinity from the perspective of women, that is, "masculinity without men" (Halberstam, in Nobel, 2004).

However, it is crucial to note that female masculinity has the added effect of queering the individual that embodies this form of masculinity. This has been seen in some readers questioning the sexuality of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers). This should not be the case as female masculinity, as Nobel (2014) stated, should be more inclusive of all women even those who do not identify with being part of the LGBTQI+ community. As mentioned, Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers) embody the same masculine qualities as their male counterparts, but the manner in which they are represented differs. While

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are represented as being masculine, their masculinity and their masculine traits are overshadowed through the sexualisation.

A similar aspect related to the textual construction of these characters, the narration and some secondary characters describe Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel as being fierce, powerful and likening them to mythological heroes. The images of these characters are represented through a different perspective that can be linked back to the notion of the male gaze associated with comic books. Text has a crucial role to play in delivering the narrative and shaping the relationships between the characters, therefore, the relationship between text and image correspond with each other. There is a dynamic relationship between the visual representation and the textual construction of the characters, narrative and comic books.

The visual representation needs to correspond with the textual construction of the narrative and characters. In analysing the data, one can observe how the text on the front cover of Marvel's figure 20 builds on and relates to the images and narrative shown in *Captain Marvel #1* (1994). It is important to understand that not all the images in the comic books are sexualizing these characters; there are instances in which the characters are not sexualized.

8.3. Limitations and Recommendation of the study

The thesis encountered limitations in terms of reaching out to the Marvel and DC comic book publishers, however both publishers have not responded to the research request at the time of the publishing of this thesis. The growing interest in comic book research will require Marvel and DC to have a line of communication with the academic community, in relation to gaining access to archival data and research requests. In relation to the literature written about the visual representation of women in comic books, there is a growing interest in how gender is represented in comic books.

On a larger scale, in the field of comic book research, the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* is published annually. This thesis encountered similar research papers with different approaches, both in literature and theory. However, the research papers did provide insight into the field of comic book research. In terms of literature in the field of linguistics, more specifically in the field of sociolinguistics, there is a gap in the literature. Comic books provide an opportunity for sociolinguistics to examine dynamic components, such as the representation of race, gender and class through the elements of multimodality.

In terms of the data collecting process, it was the intention of this thesis to examine the visual representation of other characters, outside the superhero character. Collecting data from Marvel Unlimited was a simple process to follow as Marvel made their interface easy for users to navigate. DC comic books are developing an online platform similar to Marvel Unlimited. This will assist researchers in collecting data from a source that is affiliated with the publishers. Future research could use this opportunity to examine the visual representation of other women, such as Catwoman or Poison Ivy, from the DC comic book universe or how men are represented in DC comic books.

The research could take a different approach in collecting data with the inclusion of participant data collected from a focus group of comic book readers. This could give the researcher an opportunity to examine the perspectives of those within the comic book community about issues of representation and their perspectives on the inclusion of diverse characters. Another approach that would be interesting to look at would be the analysis of hegemonic masculinity within comic books, as there is a standard of how men are presented in comic books as well, perhaps following a similar application of the modes such as gaze, gesture and costume.

Further recommendations include expanding and developing the notion of female masculinity, as this thesis included the discussion on women who do not self identify as queer to be included into the notion of female masculinity. Developing the notion of female masculinity could pave a path for more social researchers to discuss how gender identity is expressed and how, through gender expression, traditional gender norms are being challenged. In terms of applying this notion to today's society in which gender has become more fluid, it is crucial that researchers continue to develop and build on this notion, by discussing aspects of masculinity, gender identity and feminism.

8.4. Conclusion

Examining the representation of female masculinity in Marvel and DC comic books has provided insight into the manner in which women and gender identity are constructed in the above comic books. It is through the modes that the characters have developed throughout the comic book ages; the female body in comic books has evolved in terms of how women are represented in society. The larger discourse of the media views the female body as being the object of sexualisation. This is a variable that is dependent on the audience and the target market. Due to comic books having a large male audience, the female body is represented in a

sexual manner. The relationship between the visual representation and the textual representation is dynamic and crucial in this medium.

These two aspects need to complement each other in order for the narrative to progress, in that the visual representation needs to relate to the textual component of the narrative and vice versa. Through the discussion and engagement with the literature and data, this thesis has reached its objectives. This thesis has examined the multimodal representation of female masculinity and women in Marvel and DC comic books and concluded that the modes are a crucial element in the representation of women. It is through the modes that the characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are sexualized.

In the data collected, this thesis has included the past and present representations of the characters of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, in that the characters have drastically developed from their first appearance to their most recent appearance. Marvel and DC comic books have created female characters that challenge traditional gender norms and roles with both characters being regarded as feminist icons and challengers of the status quo of women in their respective comic universes. Their visual representation does not relate to their empowering characteristics. Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are symbolic and empowering characters that transcend through the pages of their comic books.

It is apparent that any changes to a character's appearance and the inclusion of diversity may be met with backlash from some members in the comic book community. It is important to take into consideration that changing the style and the manner in which these characters are represented will take time. The comic book industry and community remain largely male dominated, but there is an increase in the number of girls and women within the industry and community. It is crucial that not only Marvel and DC comic books focus on their representation and how this affects their audience, but all comic books need to re-evaluate their approach to representing gender and diversity.

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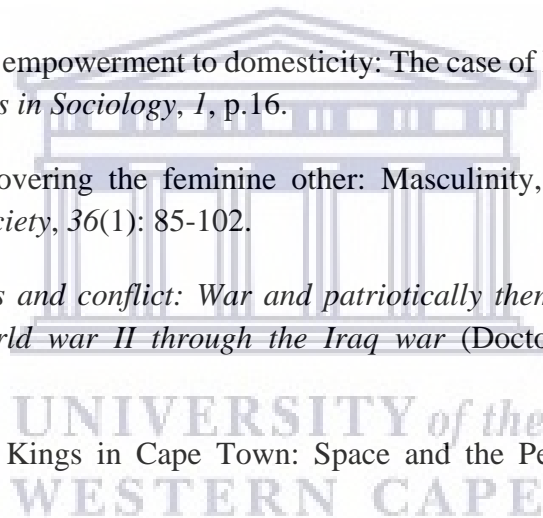
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